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Tranquil Transgressions: The Formation of a Feminine Social Identity in Helen McNicoll's Representations of Women

by

Lynne Lacombe Robinson ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the work of the Canadian painter Helen McNicoll (1879-1915) who spent the majority of her career working in England during the first two decades of the twentieth century, a period dominated by debates concerning sexual politics and women's socio-political roles. Although McNicoll experienced professional success at home and abroad, after her death her work and reputation fell into obscurity for decades. This investigation questions the reasons for her erasure from the Canadian cultural record as well as the gendered analysis her work has received by contemporary Canadian critics. It argues for an alternative, feminist interpretation of McNicoll's paintings of women by recognizing them as informed by the social, political, and historical contexts in which McNicoll was an active participant.

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Abbreviations

AAM	Art Association of Montreal
AGO	Art Gallery of Ontario
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
OSA	Ontario Society of Artists
RBA	Royal Society of British Artists
RCA	Royal Canadian Academy
SWA	Society of Women Artists
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

Introduction

"And Who is Helen McNicoll?": Re-defining her Works' Significance

> One of the most profoundly original and technically accomplished of Canadian artists. . . . Possessed of an aggressive and active intellect . . . Helen McNicoll was no amateur - there are indeed few painters in the Dominion who take their art as seriously as she did.[1]

Helen McNicoll (1879-1915) attained professional success during a career that spanned only a decade. In a portrait painted by Robert Harris in 1910, McNicoll is depicted holding the accouterments of her practice (Figure 1). She is represented in the manner in which her peers and contemporaries considered her: as a serious and accomplished artist. She defied contemporary norms by living as an unmarried, independent woman in an era when independent women were an anomaly. McNicoll worked during an exciting time for women artists. She was amongst those who penetrated the spaces of male culture at the turn of the twentieth century by seeking training and work as artists in greater numbers than ever before. Spending the majority of her career in England and travelling throughout Europe, McNicoll was abreast of current developments in modern art. Her images of country landscapes, the labor of rural women and children, and the leisure pastimes of their middle-class counterparts are marked with the influence of British impressionism.

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[1] "A Loss to Canadian Art," Saturday Night (10 July 1925): 4.

McNicoll died in Swanage, England due to complications from diabetes at the age of thirty-five. When the news of her death reached Canada, critics characterized her as one of the most skilled and respected Canadian painters of her generation. Ten years after her death, the Montreal Museum of Fine Art celebrated McNicoll's career with a memorial retrospective of her work. In a review of the exhibit, The Montreal Gazette stated that McNicoll's paintings were "a brave showing and [indicated] that in the death of this artist Canadian painting suffered a distinct loss."[2] Her work was also included in the Art Gallery of Ontario's 1926 inaugural exhibition, amongst venerated Canadian painters like Cornelius Krieghoff, Tom Thomson, and James William Morrice. As art historian Joan Murray has noted, the grouping of her work with such renowned artists "is a measure of the respect shown to Helen McNicoll."[3]

The professional success and prestige McNicoll acquired during her life are unequivocal. Yet, after the AGO's exhibition and only a decade after she died, her work and reputation fell into obscurity. The most influential studies written about Canada's art history, including those by Newton MacTavish, William Colgate, J. Russell Harper, and Dennis Reid, made no mention of McNicoll. Only a few of her paintings were secured by Canadian art galleries. The rest of her oeuvre remained concealed from public knowledge, in the possession of her family and private collectors, until the 1970s when a renewed interest in her work emerged. In 1974, Globe and Mail columnist Kay

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[2] "Memorial Show of Work by Canadian," Montreal Gazette (10 November): 4.

[3] Joan Murray, Helen McNicoll: Oil Paintings from the Estate (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1974), 4.

Kritswizer wrote:

> And who is Helen McNicoll? We may well ask.... She belongs to that category of women painters who were elbowed out of the ranks by the passage of the years, by a lack of gallery recognition, or by her male contemporaries, and, sometimes, by all three.[4]

McNicoll's rediscovery occurred during a period of extensive feminist inquiry into the work of women artists omitted from Art History because of the discipline's traditional androcentric methodologies. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s that motivated this inquiry peaked in 1975, which was declared International Women's Year. Canada celebrated this event with two major exhibits honoring Canadian women artists.[5] That same year, the McNicoll estate paintings were offered to Toronto gallery owner Jerrold Morris, who exhibited them in his commercial gallery. Since then, the rare occasions that McNicoll's paintings have appeared at auction have resulted in record-setting prices, and her work has been the subject of numerous exhibitions in Canada and the United States.[6]

In 1999, the Art Gallery of Ontario held a McNicoll retrospective, curated by Natalie Luckyj. Her research for the exhibit provided a comprehensive survey of McNicoll's life and career, and was the most extensive investigation conducted on her oeuvre up to that point. Luckyj argued that the tranquil qualities of McNicoll's landscapes and genre scenes appeal to viewers' sentimental yearnings for a less complicated existence:

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[4] Kay Kritswizer, "McNicoll Exhibit Ends Years of Neglect," Globe & Mail (16 November 1974).

[5] In 1975, From Women's Eyes: Women Painters in Canada, curated by Dorothy Farr and Natalie Luckyj, was held in Kingston at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre and included two paintings by Helen McNicoll. Some Canadian Women Artists, curated by Mayo Graham, was held at the National Gallery of Canada.

[6] McNicoll's painting A Quiet Spot broke the auction record for her work in 1996. It sold for $44,000 at a Joyner's auction in Toronto. Previously, the highest price McNicoll's work sold for was $30,000. Since 1995, McNicoll's work has been exhibited in Calgary, Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec, Halifax, Saint John, New York, Pittsburgh, and Memphis. In 2000, McNicoll was featured in a German study of Canadian and American impressionism entitled Malerei des Impressionismus: 1860-1920 by Peter Feist as well as in Anne Newland's survey Canadian Art: From Its Beginnings.

> Helen McNicoll's luminous and intimate paintings celebrate the separate world of women and children and the rituals of everyday life that today appear idyllic. They answer a need for a nostalgic return to the lost and seemingly innocent worlds of late Victorian and Edwardian times. . . . the demand for images of a gentler and quieter world far from the hectic pace of contemporary existence is still present today.[7]

Luckyj's summary reflects the general critical opinion regarding McNicoll's work. She has become known as the painter of sunshine. Her works have been described as "beautiful, sunny, and joyous,"[8] as representing "traditional maternity" and a "non-threatening idealized world."[9]

These interpretations posit McNicoll's paintings as romanticizations of an innocent, bygone era; the capsulation of an untainted period before the advent of modernism and the dramatic social changes it introduced. Incongruous with these interpretations are the facts that McNicoll worked during a modernist moment and in a modernist style, yet her paintings are made to seem anachronistic and emotive. Such interpretations do not account for the numerous societal and institutional obstacles with which McNicoll had to contend as a professional woman artist in the early-twentieth century, and how her style and subject matter were informed by these circumstances. Given the social and political contexts in which McNicoll lived and worked, her paintings should be read for the alternate, feminist meanings that they contain regarding the lived experience of women artists during an intense period of social change, a period which destabilized women's roles and definitions of femininity. Art Historian Deborah Cherry supports this view through her confirmation that women's social identities were in transition during the period in which McNicoll negotiated her artistic practice:

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[7] Natalie Luckyj, Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999), 15.
[8] "The Farmyard," New Brunswick Telegraph (18 September 1999).
[9] "Reviving a Faded Glory," Hamilton Spectator (13 November 1999).

> A woman's position in and understanding of femininity [at the turn of the twentieth century] could alter profoundly in the course of a year or the passage of a lifetime. Femininities were socially, psychically, and historically formed; they changed over a half-century fissured by massive social and economic changes. These transformations profoundly restructured artistic practice and identities for the 'modern' woman.[10]

Concerns regarding the social and political positions of women in the early-twentieth century are visible in McNicoll's representations of women, particularly in her images of women in domestic interiors. The Open Door, The Victorian Dress, Reflection, and The Chintz Sofa are four paintings which speak to a preoccupation with a new sense of identity for women that lies beyond their circumscription within the socially-constructed spheres of femininity and domesticity (Figures 2, 3, 4, & 5). These works should also be read politically, as their iconography can be interpreted in relation to the Canadian and British women's suffrage movements. This thesis, therefore, will examine the social and political conditions that formed the backdrop to McNicoll's development and career as a professional artist, and apply these factors to a feminist interpretation of these four images. The paintings will serve as historical sources for the examination of how the social category of woman was viewed at the turn of the twentieth century, and how Helen McNicoll articulated her perceptions of femininity through her representations of women in domestic settings. The methodology on which this thesis is based takes into account Canadian historians Anita Clair Fellman and Veronica Strong-Boag's assertion that:

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[10] Deborah Cherry, Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists (London: Routledge, 1993), 10.

> Coming gradually is a further broadening of the definitions of what constitutes an historical source. Photographs and other visual materials are viewed with an increasingly sophisticated eye for the clues they provide for sense of self and for patterns of interaction among family members, friends, and coworkers.[11]

The focus of Chapter One is The Open Door, painted c. 1913, whose title speaks to the new social and political opportunities women were claiming at the time this work was created. The title evokes the image of a new frontier, an invitation to partake in the public activities that had formerly been off limits to women. This theme relates directly to McNicoll's experience as a professional woman artist in the early-twentieth century. The Open Door features the image of a woman who stands sewing in front of a door open to a sunlit garden. The figure is located on the boundary between the interior, private realm and the external world of nature, two spheres traditionally associated with women. The Open Door will serve as a visual platform for the discussion of the socio-political contexts that informed McNicoll's work, and in which she negotiated her artistic practice. This chapter will argue that the outdoor landscape also signifies the expanded social opportunities available to women at this time, and that this image addresses the precarious transition from the private to public spheres which women like McNicoll were experiencing. It will also be viewed as a representation of how social conventions constricted women's opportunities c.1910, and how the ability to transcend these confines through social and political action became possible for women at this time.

Reflection and The Victorian Dress are the topic of Chapter Two. Painted as companion pieces, these images speak to McNicoll's perceptions of the construction of feminine identity through dress and fashion. At first glance, both paintings appear to be typical representations of female vanity and the decorous woman. McNicoll has depicted these women in ways that challenge these tropes, however. In contrast to tradition, the young woman in Reflection does not turn to view herself in the mirror. She subverts the stereotype of the decorous woman through her indifference to both the eye of the viewer and the lure of her reflection. In The Victorian Dress, a model wearing the same conspicuously fashionable outfit is shown reading. The central focuses of this image contradict each other; her attire signifies female passivity yet she is occupied with an intellectual activity that renders her oblivious to the viewer's gaze. This chapter will explore the construction of femininity through art and fashion at the turn of the twentieth century while emphasizing how women artists like McNicoll intervened in dominant modes of representation to create meanings of their own regarding femininity.

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[11] Anita Clair Fellman and Veronica Strong-Boag, Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, Ltd., 1991), 8.

An analysis of The Chintz Sofa is the focus of Chapter Three. The setting of this painting is McNicoll's London studio which she shared with Dorothea Sharp, her colleague, close friend, and model for this painting. Sharp is pictured sewing or embroidering, a traditional marker of femininity and women's artistic production. The white dress she wears, and the white handkerchief she sews, were symbols of the women's suffrage movement in Britain. The iconography of the women's suffrage movement as it appeared in various forms of visual media will be discussed in relation to this work. The similarities between suffrage iconography and The Chintz Sofa will be emphasized in order to derive a socio-political interpretation. Also, the importance of women's friendships and networks to the professional success of women artists in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century will be explored in relation to McNicoll and Sharp's friendship.

The theoretical frameworks on which this thesis is based are the feminist and socio-materialist investigations of Deborah Cherry, Roszika Parker, Grieselda Pollock, and Lisa Tickner. As these scholars have shown, the methods used to interpret art produced by women cannot be the same as those used for art produced by men. Parker and Pollock argue that such an approach to art historical investigation fails to acknowledge the very different social and political experiences of men and women throughout history:

> Any argument that proposes 'art has no sex' ignores the difference of men and women's experience of social structures of class and the sexual divisions within our society and its historically varied effects on the art men and women produce.[12]

Art History's traditional marginalization of women artists has been widely exposed and critiqued over the last thirty years, thanks to the invaluable research of feminist cultural historians like Cherry, Parker, Pollock, and Tickner. It has been well established by these theoretical pioneers that the work of women artists like McNicoll has been deemed inferior and often completely negated from the art historical record because of androcentric and modernist biases, despite ample evidence that women have always been involved in artistic production.[13]

It is obvious that critics, researchers, and the public have considered McNicoll's work important, both during her life and since its rediscovery. This makes her sixty-year absence from Canada's art historical record particularly conspicuous. The loss of public memory regarding McNicoll has been ascribed to the fact that her work was inaccessible for decades.[14] Very little is known about McNicoll's life and art practice. Few of her works are accurately dated and several are yet to be located, thus a complete study of her oeuvre is impossible. No significant record of her life exists in letters or diaries, therefore the mapping or tracing of details regarding her lived experience is very difficult.[15] Understandably, these factors have impeded the recording and investigation of her work.

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[12] Roszika Parker and Grieselda Pollock, Old Mistresses: Women Art and Ideology (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1981), 24.
[13] Ibid., 1-50.

But there are other reasons for the prolonged neglect of McNicoll's legacy. The methods used to interpret her paintings have significantly contributed to the lengthy lack of recognition. Masculine and modernist biases have been key factors. The style and subject matter of the Group of Seven, which came to dominate Canadian painting after the First World War, eclipsed McNicoll's representations of idyllic landscapes and feminine activities. Her images of rural life, women and children were deemed sentimental, belonging to the period before the advent of modernism. They were considered unworthy of recording and saving, judged insignificant because they did not reflect the important, male-instigated events of history, of Canadian identity, of modernism. As Parker and Pollock have pointed out:

> Curiously, the works on women artists dwindle away at precisely the moment when women's social emancipation and increasing education should have promoted a greater awareness of women's participation in all walks of life.[16]

Ironically, the interpretations based on sentimentality and nostalgia that caused McNicoll's obscurity are the same as those offered by contemporary researchers after her rediscovery. The result has been a mis-recognition of her work's significance.

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[14] Luckyj, 15.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Parker and Pollock, 3.

The style that McNicoll chose to paint in has also affected the way her images have been interpreted. Because impressionist and modernist works have been traditionally read as having no social or political content - that they are only about the surface - McNicoll's work must not have any deeper meaning than the tranquility her leisurely images depict. Such an interpretation does not acknowledge women's different experience of impressionism and modernism. It also insinuates that McNicoll chose this style because she did not have any social or political intentions for her art, but such an interpretation diminishes her intellectual agency and removes her from history. Women's experience of modernity, although different from men's on account of their divergent social positions, was just as involved as their male contemporaries, and when the stereotypical analysis of women's artistic production is displaced, their creative and intellectual engagement with their historical moment becomes evident. Whitney Chadwick's arguments regarding women artists and impressionism emphasize this view:

> Some women were drawn to impressionism precisely because the new painting legitimized the subject matter of domestic and social life of which women had intimate knowledge. Moreover the decision to work en plein air and forego the historical subjects, with the complex studio set-ups and multiple models they required, transformed the relationship between painters' daily life and his or her studio life. This aspect of impressionism deserves more study for it profoundly shaped women's relationship to the movement.[17]

McNicoll's work needs to be read for signs of the social and political upheavals regarding women, for the attempt at the articulation of a female identity which was so ambiguous and contentious during McNicoll's lifetime. We need to critique the idea that her work evokes a sense of nostalgia and focus on the elements that suggest something else, something about what it was like to be a professional woman artist at a time when this role was disputed and socially transgressive. McNicoll successfully negotiated the positions of professional artist and middle-class woman, which were contradictory during the late Victorian and Edwardian era. As Lisa Tickner articulates in her study of women artists and the movement for women's suffrage in Britain:

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[17] Whitney Chadwick, Women, Art, and Ideology 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1996), 232.

> The idea of the woman artist was uncomfortable and contested. It was understood that the serious pursuit of art was incompatible with the demands of marriage and domesticity. The role, attainments, and expectations of the woman artist were fiercely debated in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Women artists, whether they were aware of it or not, were engaged in a struggle with the incompatible terms of their own identity.[18]

McNicoll studied in and exhibited with some of the most progressive and recognized Canadian and British art institutions of the period including the Ontario Society of Artists, the Art Association of Montreal, and the Society of Women Artists in England. In 1913, she was elected an associate to the Royal Canadian Academy and the following year was appointed a full member of the Royal Society of British Artists.[19] The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts awarded her painting September Evening their first Jessie

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[18] Lisa Tickner, The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1904-14 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 17.

[19] When the Royal Canadian Academy's constitution was written in 1880, only one woman, Charlotte Schreiber, was chosen to be among the thirteen painters who were selected charter academicians. However, the RCA's constitution prevented her from participating in the organization's administration. It stated that women would be eligible for membership but would not be allowed to attend business meetings or sit on councils. During the next 53 years, 19 women painters were elected to the lesser rank of associate of the RCA, but no other woman was appointed a full academician until Marion Long in 1933.

Dow Prize in 1908 for "the most meritorious oil painting by a Canadian artist."[20] McNicoll's accomplishments and lived experience evidences the way she was able to transcend the confines of domesticity at a time when women's social and political demands and actions were altering their traditional roles.

McNicoll's life and career were concurrent with a period in Canadian and British history dominated by intensified struggles concerning sexual politics. Debates about women's natural and unnatural roles were argued in discourses of politics, social reform, medicine, law, education, and art. The traditional social and political values that governed the lives of Canadian and British women were radically challenged and displaced by the early-twentieth century's movement for women's suffrage and social emancipation. Some women and men championed the idea of the New Woman, while others opposed her goals of pursuing an education, a professional career, a political and social voice, and the right to determine her own destiny; both identified her as a threat to the established social order. The new forms of power that women began to claim altered traditional definitions of femininity and, consequently, female identity. Rosemary Betterton contends that these changes "marked an irrevocable alteration in the ways in which women were constituted as a historical category as well as in the lived experience of individual women."[21]

By the early 1900s, women artists in Canada were increasingly active and visible in all spheres of cultural activity, but their contributions continued to be marginalized.

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[20] The Art Association of Montreal awarded the Jessie Dow Prize from 1908 until 1965. It was given for excellence of work in oil, watercolor, and sculpture. The Jessie Dow Prize was considered the most prestigious of Canadian awards during the years of its allocation.

[21] Rosemary Betterton, "Women Artists, Modernity and Suffrage Cultures in Britain and Germany 1890-1920," Women Artists and Modernism, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 18.

Canadian historian Maria Tippett claims:

> Because women artists generally did not have the advantage of formal training, because they created their work in leisure, not in work time, and because they functioned outside the market place, their production was deemed to be of little or no value. Women artists were labeled amateurs. This epithet implied a studious adherence to established conventions, a presumed lack of seriousness and an absence of innovation.[22]

McNicoll realized a career as a professional artist despite these gender-specific obstacles. Her social and economic positions were important factors in her ability to manage and sustain a professional career. For the women artists who transcended domesticity and marriage to occupy the spaces of culture in the early-twentieth century, a collusion of economic, social, and psychological factors determined their success. "Ambition, luck, and determination came into play," note art historians Oriana Baddeley, Judith Collins, and Teresa Grimes, "alongside financial considerations, class, and social position."[23] McNicoll's family was wealthy enough to afford her education, travel, and living expenses abroad, but her own determination cannot be discounted. Not only did McNicoll face gender discrimination in her professional endeavors, she also dealt with a physical disability. She lost her hearing after contracting scarlet fever at the age of two. Deafness, and the social stigma that went with it at the turn of the twentieth century, doubtlessly complicated her professional endeavors further. The achievements she attained despite such barriers underscore her ambition.

The attempt to offer an alternative, feminist interpretation of Helen McNicoll's work is a challenging task. Her depictions of women in domestic settings do not explicitly engage social or political themes. It is only by reading these images through the perspective of feminist theory that these works clearly represent a concern with the socio-political position of women in the early-twentieth century. Why did McNicoll choose to depict such innocuous images if she intended them to be social critiques? The fact that a feminist visual language did not exist at the time McNicoll was working meant that women artists had to intervene in dominant modes of representation in subtle ways. She would have been forced to explore feminist concerns through established styles and conventions, using a known visual language. McNicoll's was a generation that transcended the confines of domesticity and marriage to claim the spaces of male culture. Once women were involved in this space, however, their activities had to remain in the realm of the accepted and traditional. Their positions were precarious. As Pollock and Parker have noted:

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[22] Maria Tippett, By a Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women (Toronto: Penguin, 1992), 14.

[23] Oriana Baddeley, Judith Collins, and Teresa Grimes, Five Women Painters (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1989), 17.

> In the struggle to gain access to institutions and to acquire reputations women tend to focus on the status quo, on participating in the existing establishment from which they want and need recognition.[24]

The possibility for women to create images with meanings of their own has always been, and remains, very difficult. Traditional iconography works against women's attempts to represent themselves. Any representation of a woman, or a woman and a child, could (and still often does) collapse into the tropes of femininity and maternity, simply naturalizing the dominant ideology of woman as other or as mother. Women artists in the early-twentieth century still lacked the power and language to directly shape the world in their own image, even though they had gained access to the cultural sphere.

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[24] Parker and Pollock, 115.

It is impossible to prove indisputably that McNicoll constructed her images of women in domestic settings as social critiques of femininity. Parker and Pollock's comments are interesting here:

> . . . nineteenth century women were beginning to speak out on their own behalf for their own political causes. In the cultural sphere, this included challenging masculine domination in the privileged areas of high culture, such as epic poetry or neo-classical sculpture. On the other hand, the ideological positions of the same women were often less radical than the implications of their activities in these areas. . . . The middle-class feminist desired an enlarged sphere of self-realization for a feminine nature which she accepted, even if she contested the more limited ideologies that denied intellectual capacities and non-maternal desires.[25]

McNicoll's paintings of women in domestic settings can be read as feminist statements, however, given our facility for historical hindsight combined with the contexts in which these works were produced. We now have the ability, theories, and language to read for signs of feminist concerns and we should analyze her images of women in domestic settings as historical sources for the understanding of women's lives in the early-twentieth century.

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[25] Ibid., 104.

Chapter 1

On the Threshold of Autonomy:

The Open Door

> Dolly worked very hard, she went around amongst the members and brought them to my pictures - if they did not like them she went after others. . . . It was the older members who did not like my things. One old man was very angry and said to Dolly, "If that paintings is right, then the National Gallery is all wrong." One nice old man said to D., "It will be a bitter pill for some now that your friend is elected."[1]

Helen McNicoll was elected to the Royal Society of British Artists in 1913. She had already received recognition in Canada by exhibiting in the most important showcases for Canadian artists in the early-twentieth century including the Royal Canadian Academy, the Ontario Society of Artists, and the Art Association of Montreal. McNicoll's election to the RBA further distinguished her career and solidified her success in the eyes of her Canadian contemporaries who considered European study and achievement a marker of professional status.[2] Her ability to manage a thriving career depended on exhibitions, exposure, and recognition from legitimizing bodies such as the RBA. Self-promotion and the construction of an appropriate professional identity were essential to McNicoll's practice, which she managed strategically. McNicoll planned her training and professional development in the same way as many other successful artists of the period did. She studied with influential teachers, she sought training abroad, and exhibited widely. McNicoll understood the importance of gaining recognition from the male-dominated art establishment, but she also relied on a network of her peers - other women artists who could share her goals and the frustrations experienced in the negotiation of their careers during this period. The solicitation of support for her nomination to the RBA by her cousin Dolly McNicoll, who was also an artist, which McNicoll described to her father in a letter announcing her election to the RBA attests to the positive influences garnered by such peer associations. The letter also emphasizes the criticism McNicoll encountered and alludes to the obstacles she faced in the realization of her professional identity, which were significantly informed by her gender.

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[1] Helen McNicoll, London, England, to David McNicoll, Montreal, Canada, 19 March 1913, Artists' Files, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario.

[2] Susan Butlin, "Making a Living: Florence Carlyle and the Negotiation of a Professional Artistic Identity," M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1995, 98.

In The Open Door (Figure 2), a work dated to the same year as her election to the RBA, McNicoll addresses the transitory position occupied by women like herself who were transcending their domestic roles and procuring public ones at the time this work was painted. The title of the image connotes the expanded opportunities women were realizing. It is an image which speaks to the invitation to participate in a social sphere that had been formerly denied women, an invitation made possible by the late-Victorian and Edwardian women who had claimed the spaces of male culture through their organized efforts for social and political equality. This chapter will analyze The Open Door in the context of McNicoll's experience as an independent, public woman at a time when this identity was met with admiration by some and criticism by many. It will be used as a visual platform for a discussion of McNicoll's training and professional development, the social and cultural challenges she faced in the management of her career, and the personal choices she made, such as choosing female partnerships and intellectual pursuits over marriage and maternity.

The Open Door depicts a woman standing on the threshold of domesticity and the exterior world of nature. The image's iconography is enigmatic. A woman's coat and hat hang on the back of the door, but it is unknown whether the figure has recently arrived or is planning her departure. The small window in front of which she stands is covered with a drapery, concealing the outside view and adding to the ambiguity of her presence in this room. Her contemplative, introspective expression evokes subjective meditation rather than absorption in the banal activity of sewing. The subject matter of this image allows a fluid interpretation. It could be viewed as addressing the ideological associations between femininity, domesticity, and nature which dominated social perceptions of femininity during McNicoll's life. The ancient and hierarchical dichotomy of "nature is to culture as female is to male" continued to be a persuasive social tenet in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, informing gender definitions and roles.[3] It could be argued that McNicoll's placement of the figure between two spheres which symbolize women's ideological social repression in the early-twentieth century was intended to signify confinement; the door may be open, but it leads to yet another restrictive realm.

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[3] Norma Broude, Impressionism: A feminist Reading: The Gendering of Art, Science, and Nature in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 145-46. Broude notes that the ancient ideological constructs on which the duality between femininity and nature are based have been the subject of numerous recent studies in the fields of cultural history. She argues that these intellectual traditions are recognized, both within feminist scholarship and outside of it, to have exerted a powerful influence on the shaping of Western society and thought. She also points to the contrast between the traditional associations of women with nature, both characterized as "passive" and "inert," and men with science, both viewed as "active" and "objective."

The exterior landscape can also be viewed, however, as the antithesis of domesticity - as the outside world of society and public activity. The bright, animated garden located beyond the door provides a distinct difference to the dull, muted tones of the interior, insinuating a contrast between women's traditional roles and the expanded social opportunities women were realizing when this work was painted. This is the theoretical position this chapter supports. I believe that McNicoll's identity as a transgressive, independent woman and the socio-political opportunities and obstacles women like herself faced in the negotiation of their socio-cultural identities are symbolically encoded in this work.[4]

The following discussion will position The Open Door in relation to McNicoll's lived experiences, connecting its imagery to the context of women's art practices in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in order to present it as a meaningful record of women's cultural history. An exploration of McNicoll's early training in Canada, her study at the Slade School of Art in London, her visit to the St. Ives art colony, and the associations she made throughout these endeavors will highlight her strategic professional choices. This chapter will underline McNicoll's self-reliant and pro-active approach to the control of her career so as to demonstrate the effort, determination, and agency women artists manifested in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The historical realities of McNicoll's life and career will be presented as the motivational forces behind the creation of The Open Door.

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[4] McNicoll repeatedly represented women sewing and/or wearing white dresses in her oeuvre. These were images of great significance to her, preoccupying her creative intellect. They are also motifs invested with socio-political meaning through their associations with the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century women's movement, particularly the campaign for women's suffrage in England. The importance of these iconographic meanings to the interpretation of McNicoll's work as conceding feminist meaning will be discussed in detail in Chapters Two and Three of this thesis.

McNicoll's home and family life proved a fertile environment for her development as an artist. She was born into a wealthy Montreal family who could afford the cost of her education and travels abroad at a time when the conditions for women artists were beginning to improve. "Women artists who were born in the 1870s and 1880s," note Oriana Baddeley, Judith Collins and Teresa Grimes, "were reaching maturity in the first decades of the twentieth century and the male-dominated conditions surrounding art education and exhibiting were posed to change in their favour, offering slightly better conditions."[5] Her parents encouraged and supported her artistic abilities from a young age.[6] Deafness did not hinder McNicoll's social or intellectual development, as her lived experience as a successful and admired professional artist attests.[7]

Referring to The Open Door, Reflection, The Victorian Dress, and The Chintz Sofa, Natalie Luckyj has noted, "they, like McNicoll herself, appear to act from positions of silence evoked in the muted colours, simple compositions, and contained body postures."[8] I disagree with this synopsis. To view The Open Door or any other of McNicoll's works as evoking a silence which supposedly parallels her experience as a deaf person removes her from her social context and insinuates that her work was not influenced by external sources. Historical evidence denies such an interpretation. McNicoll was an active, public woman who shared close personal relationships with other artists and participated in every artistic community she found herself in, whether in Canada or England. In several letters written to her father from England between 1907 and 1913, McNicoll articulately discussed her achievements and personal life with enthusiasm (see Appendix 1). The 'muted colors' of The Open Door and its 'simple composition', stylistic features shared by many British impressionists including Walter Sickert and Philip Winston Steer, serve to focus the viewer's attention on the solitary figure, accentuating her subjective quality. The figure's self-absorption evokes not silence but preoccupation at a time in which many women like McNicoll were experiencing the emergence of a new socio-political identity.

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[5] Oriana Baddeley, Judith Collins and Teresa Grimes. Five Women Painters (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1989), 11.

[6] Natalie Luckyj, Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999), 19. McNicoll was privately tutored at home but also attended an Oral School where she learned to lip-read and sketch, which evidences her participation in her local deaf community. This school was most likely the Mackay Center for Deaf Children founded in 1870 for the children of English-speaking, Protestant families. It is the oldest school for the deaf still in operation in Canada. Oralism was the method of instruction used at the Mackay school during the nineteenth century, a method which remains extremely controversial. Oralism was first advocated by Alexander Graham Bell in the mid-nineteenth century. He believed that sign language separated deaf people from the rest of society but speech skills would allow them to participate and appear 'normal', a notion that was also supported by many middle-class families with deaf children at this time [See Clifton F. Carbin, Deaf Heritage in Canada (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1996) 45].

[7] Ben Bahan, Robert Hoffmeister, and Harlan Lane, A Journey into the Deaf World (San Diego: Dawn Sign Press, 1996), 24-42. Bahan, Hoffemeister, and Lane argue that the cognitive, social, and intellectual development of a deaf child may be stunted by hearing parents who often become unwittingly more controlling of the child physically or emotionally in their attempts to develop coping strategies. Many such parents feel that their child will be unable to live up to their aspirations or will not become productive members of society. Evidently, this was not the case for McNicoll or her parents, who encouraged her social interactions and supported her independence. Bahan, Hoffmeister, and Lane note that deaf people are best thought of as visual people, so it should be no surprise that there has always been a substantial number of deaf artists, many with worldwide renown. They also note that art historians have yet to focus their 'trained eyes' on 'deaf art' to offer an analysis of its themes and methods.

In the early-twentieth century, middle-class women like McNicoll were heirs to the social and political changes ushered in by feminists of the previous century. As Lisa Tickner describes, the women "who benefited from new educational and professional opportunities. . . who became graduates, doctors and public officials. . . who took up sports such as tennis, cricket, golf or bicycling. . . who aspired to independence and the enlargement of their social round," were labeled New Women, a term which was first used in literature in the late-nineteenth century.[9] Issues relating to the women's movement, including the sexual and economic exploitation of women, became the principal themes in the plays of Oscar Wilde, Arthur Pinero, and Henrik Ibsen as well as the novels of George Bernard Shaw and Harley Granville Baker. Many of the women novelists of the period wrote about women's right to lead fulfilled and independent lives for a diverse readership.[10] The characters who embodied the traits of the New Woman in these literary works were based on real women who, through their campaigns for social, political and cultural equality, were entering the public sphere and claiming its spaces. In the words of the nineteenth-century American journalist and suffragist Rheta Childe, the New Woman wanted "to belong to the human race, not to the ladies aid society to the human race."[11] Tickner argues that early-twentieth century feminists advocated:

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[8] Luckyj, 70.

[9] Lisa Tickner, The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 185.

> the development of women's capacities and [were] opposed to the doctrinaire definitions of what these might be; they were against submissiveness, frivolity and fashion insofar as it perpetuated a passive and narcissistic femininity; and they were in favour of health, activity, and economic independence.[12]

The efforts of these women to transform their social roles and dominant definitions of femininity by entering the professions and demanding social and political equality were not, however, unanimously supported. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century feminists, particularly supporters of the organized campaigns for women's suffrage, were opposed by critics who believed the so-called modern woman was a perverse form of femininity, a symptom of social denigration, a threat to families and to the social establishment.[13] To combat such characterizations and garner public support for women's emancipation, suffragists were faced with the task of re-fashioning the symbol Woman as capable and deserving of equality. Representations of femininity created by artists who supported the women's movement, especially those designed for the suffrage campaign, addressed women's involvement in cultural and political work, their move from the domestic sphere into the public sphere of higher education and the professions, and towards new social identities. "The representational forms that emerge from [these] shifts," claims art historian Rosemary Betterton, "are many and diverse."[14]

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[10] Ibid., 183.
[11] As quoted in Tickner, 184.
[12] Tickner, 184.
[13] Ibid., 183.

The Open Door is an example of an image which centers on a concern with the development of a new social identity for women. McNicoll's experience of leaving her family to study and work in England and live independently was a shift from a private world into a public one. Her deliberate decision to place the woman in this image on the boundary of the private and the public references this transition. The figure's contemplative, self-absorbed demeanor shares a concern with a new sense of identity for women that lies beyond their circumscription in the domestic realm, a concern which is also found in many pro-suffrage illustrations (Figure 6).[15] The painting's 'simple' composition also echoes the social transformations women were experiencing at this time. The space in which the figure stands is depicted in dull, gray tones. She is tightly framed by the imposing door and the table which she leans against. Her access to the vibrant, exterior landscape is only a step away yet she remains inside, a configuration that speaks to the difficulties that confronted women who made the shift from private to public in the face of deeply-entrenched social ideologies regarding their roles.

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[14] Rosemary Betterton, "Women Artists, Modernity and Suffrage Cultures in Britain and Germany 1890-1920," Women Artists and Modernism, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 20.

[15] Ibid., 23. In a commercial suffrage illustration created by C. Hedly Charlton for Cicely Hamilton's essay Beware! A Warning to Suffragettes, the prison which encloses the young suffragist and the chains in which she is bound are symbolic of the social constraints that continue to bind her. Betterton argues that the "deliberate irony" of the juxtaposed text and image addressed a new feminine political subject who believed that the new century would introduce changes to the gendered sexual order.

Women artists were an important force in the questioning and challenging of the traditional feminine stereotypes that pervaded their cultural context. Art was advocated as a lucrative career for women by late-Victorian and Edwardian feminists, and women artists were an important part of the women's movement. Nineteenth-century feminist journals, in which women examined and reassessed the customs and laws that defined their public and private roles, regularly featured articles on women's place in the art world.[16] Biographies of well-known women artists, descriptions of opportunities available, status reports on women's participation in art societies, and reviews of women's art exhibits were also habitually included. The editors of these journals published such articles because they believed art offered women an excellent way to earn a livelihood. The attributes of intelligence, creativity, and independence which characterized women artists were beneficial to the women's movement's attempt to re-fashion feminine identity as capable and deserving of social and political equality. Conversely, as women who were struggling for equality in their attempts to negotiate successful careers, many women artists espoused feminist ideologies. Writing in 1892, an anonymous critic emphasized the need for women artists to support the women's movement:

> Until the day when women are treated as men's equals, it is their duty to participate in the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculptures or other women's groups. It is a duty particularly for those who do not need such groups themselves and who are capable of guiding their less talented or

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[16] Susan Waller, "Strong-Minded Critics: Feminist Art Criticism in the Nineteenth Century," Women Artists News 10.6 (1985) : 12.

> less fortunate sisters. Thus, they demonstrate that the aristocracy of talent is also an aristocracy of feeling and heart. To do other wise is to lack that feminine solidarity that should come before every other personal consideration, interest or vanity.[17]

McNicoll's participation with the Women's Art Society in Canada and the Society of Women Artists in England proves that she recognized the importance of 'feminine solidarity'. Her involvement with these groups underlines the likelihood of her feminist activity and alignment with the ideologies of the women's movement.

By the turn of the twentieth century, reports in feminist journals showed that the situation for women artists was changing. Opportunities for women's art education, training, and recognition had improved considerably and women were now accepted as students in art schools and studios throughout Europe and America. Several societies specifically for women artists were in existence, including the Ladies' Art Association in New York, L'Union des Femmes Peintures et Sculptures in Paris, The National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors in America, and the Women's Art Association in Canada. With the founding of the Pennsylvania Academy in 1868, New York's Art Students' League in the late 1880s, and London's Royal Academy Schools in 1893, art schools introduced segregated classes in which women could study from a nude model.[18] Maria Tippett argues that opportunities for Canadian women, however, remained more limited at this time:

> Women artists in Canada were slower to develop an institutional framework through which they might win acceptance as full time professional artists. . . The existence of the Women's Art Association after

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[17] As quoted in Waller, 23.

[18] Maria Tippett, By a Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1992), 27.

> 1890 did not compensate for the discriminatory practices of the major societies.[19]

Two of the most important art societies in Canada in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, from which recognition was considered a badge of professional status, had gender discrimination enshrined in their constitutions. The Ontario Society of Artists admitted women as full members from the time of its inception in 1872, but restricted them from access to the decision-making processes of the Society. The OSA's constitution stated, "women shall not have the privilege of voting or attending meetings unless specifically invited to do so by resolution of the Society."[20] The Royal Canadian Academy's constitution prevented women from being elected full members when it was written in 1880. They were eligible to be elected as associates who could exhibit with the Academy, as McNicoll did, but they could not attend meetings, sit on committees, or participate in any formal decision making. This restrictive clause was dropped from the Academy's constitution in 1913, yet no woman was elected full Academician until 1933.[21] Despite these conditions, Canadian women embarked on artistic careers in greater numbers than ever before during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. From the Conseil des arts et manufactures and the Art Association school in Montreal, to the Victoria School of Art and Design in Halifax and the Ontario School of Art in Toronto, women students outnumbered their male peers.[22] Yet, as Tippett has noted, women were conspicuous as students rather than teachers of art because, "gaining social acceptance as an artist following graduation from art school was something at which the fewer male students were more successful."[23]

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[19] Ibid., 30.

[20] As quoted in Butlin, 109.

[21] Rebecca Sisler, Passionate Spirits: A History of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, 1880-1980 (Toronto: Dark, Irwin & Company Ltd., 1980), 33-37.

[22] Tippett, 28.

This was the cultural climate in which McNicoll began her training at the Art Association of Montreal c. 1900. She would have been well aware of the gender- based obstacles confronting women artists, but she was able to circumvent these limitations and realize a level of success apparently reserved for her male classmates. Indeed, in the opinion of her contemporary critics, McNicoll's achievements set her apart from her female contemporaries. "[McNicoll] had been developing her powers right up to the time of her last exhibition in which respect she afforded a striking contrast to the prevailing type of feminine painter," praised the writer of her 1915 obituary which appeared in Saturday Night magazine.[24] Like McNicoll, the 'prevailing type' of woman artist by the outbreak of the First World War was working to international standards and applying her modernist styles to Canadian and foreign subject matter, yet the majority of these artists continued to be ignored or had their work analyzed according to gender-based criteria.[25] Unlike the majority of her female contemporaries, however, McNicoll never married. She was not forced to compromise her creative ambitions in order to fulfill the domestic responsibilities of marriage and motherhood which hindered many women artists from fully 'developing their powers'.[26]

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[23] Ibid., 20.
[24] "A Loss to Canadian Art," Saturday Night, 28 (10 July 1915): 3.
[25] Tippett, 55.
[26] Janice Anderson, "Negotiating Gendered Spaces: The Artistic Practice of Mary Hiester Reid," Quiet Harmony: The Art of Mary Hiester Reid, eds. Brain Foss and Janice Anderson (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2000), 27-51. Anderson's discussion of the life and career of Mary Hiester Reid emphasizes how her marriage to fellow artist George Reid impeded her ability to realize a truly self-fulfilled career. Anderson argues that several of Reid's paintings address domesticity and the restraints imposed on women through marriage.

Once again, the imagery of The Open Door subtly references these social mores and the repressive effects they had on women's opportunities for self-fulfillment in the way McNicoll has portrayed the solitary, self-absorbed figure. The task of sewing with which she is occupied refers directly to a tradition of women's domestic production for the care of their homes and their families. She undertakes this task alone, wearing an expression that alludes to introspective meditation rather than the mundane task of housekeeping. In the context of the socio-cultural milieu in which McNicoll was immersed when she created this work, her deliberate placement of the figure on the threshold of the domestic sphere and the outside realm cannot be underestimated. This is an image that directly speaks to the transitory social positions which women like McNicoll occupied in the first decades of the twentieth century.

McNicoll was able to successfully confront the challenging socio-cultural context in which she negotiated her artistic practice. She did so by strategically managing the development and maintenance of her career, even as a student. She studied with William Brymner at the AAM, as Luckyj has noted, "like many other upper-middle class young women in Montreal."[27] Unlike the majority of her classmates, however, McNicoll went on to attain a successful professional career. Brymner was one of the most influential painters of this period, as well as a supportive teacher who encouraged the young women who sought his respected instruction to develop the skills needed for professional success, such as drawing from a nude model. He was also progressive in his attitude towards art, advocating the newer impressionist style of painting and working directly from nature. In his approach to teaching and his stylistic preferences, Brymner was an astute choice of teacher for McNicoll who shared his intellectual outlook on art. It is not a coincidence that she chose to study with Brymner. Her decision to do so was the result of her serious commitment towards professional success, which she began to attain early on in her career by winning a drawing scholarship for a year's study at the AAM in 1897.

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[27] Luckyj, 23.

McNicoll's resolve to develop an impressionistic approach to style and subject matter was also carefully calculated for professional success. Not only was impressionism a style offering experimentation with formal elements, it was also a movement that positioned women artists such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt alongside their male peers. Impressionism offered women a place amongst the prominent members of the modernist avant-garde.[28] It also legitimized subject matter previously considered unsuitable for painting, such as domestic scenes and the spaces of femininity, thus enabling women to explore the social contexts which dominated their experiences of modernity.[29]

In 1902, McNicoll left for England to study at the Slade School of Art in London. The Slade School, which opened its doors in 1871, was considered one of the most progressive institutions of the period, implementing an equal opportunity approach to the instruction of men and women from the beginning. Writing in 1883, a woman student at the Slade School described its pioneering qualities:

> Here, for the first time in England, indeed in Europe, a public Fine Art school was thrown open to male and female students on precisely the same terms, and giving to both sexes fair and equal opportunities. And it is

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[28] Tippett, 30.

[29] Griselda Pollock, Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 34-68.

> to the precedent then established that ladies have since elsewhere had the necessary advantages for study placed within their reach.[30]

The instructors at the Slade during the time McNicoll was in attendance included Fred Brown and Philip Winston Steer, two of the leading proponents and practitioners of British impressionism. Here McNicoll had access to artists at the forefront of British modernism and the founders of British impressionism who advocated pleinerism and humanistic subject matter.[31] McNicoll was exposed to contemporary styles and developments in modern art which clearly informed her work. Luckyj has supported the view that McNicoll's paintings were influenced by this progressive artistic environment. She comments that:

> [The] 'new romantic/atmospheric' style permeated the Slade School, which advocated a naturalism and evocation of mood, and rejected the sentimentality and story-telling of late Victorian art. McNicoll's light-filled interiors . . . images of secluded gardens . . . and sunlit outdoor scenes . . . resonate with the imagery of the "new romantics", and British impressionism in general.[32]

Surprisingly, the acknowledgement of McNicoll's style as being directly influenced and informed by a movement which rejected the 'sentimentality and story-telling of late Victorian art' is later contradicted by Luckyj along with other late-twentieth century critics like the Art Gallery of Ontario's director Matthew Teitelbaum, who have characterized McNicoll's oeuvre as 'nostalgic' and 'heartfelt'.[33] These gendered conclusions serve to efface McNicoll's active involvement in the artistic developments of her moment, while diminishing the intellectual autonomy that inspired the subject matter of her work. Luckyj has also claimed that McNicoll decided to pursue training in

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[30] Charlotte J. Weeks, "Women at Work: The Slade Girls," The Magazine of Art 6 (1883): 325.
[31] Kenneth McConkey, British Impressionism (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1989), 10-22.
[32] Luckyj, 25.
[33] Ibid., 13 and 15.

England based on Brymner's advice, another summation which disables her agency.[34] Seeking professional advice regarding her future was prudent, but McNicoll would have ultimately made this decision on her own.

McNicoll's choice to leave Canada, in which the opportunities for women artists remained limited in comparison to those offered in Europe, should be viewed as a strategic one. She deliberately chose to establish herself and develop her career in a more advantageous environment. As well, her decision to pursue training at a progressive and prestigious institution like the Slade demonstrates the careful and forward-thinking approach she took to the planning of her career. It should not be assumed, however, that by immersing herself in a cultural environment considered more conducive to the realization of professional success for women at this time, McNicoll did not face gender-based obstacles in England. Art historian Hilary Taylor argues that, despite the Slade School's claims of a liberal attitude towards its women students, it conducted its classes across segregated lines.[35] Men and women could work together in the antique rooms, but not in the life rooms and women students were only awarded lesser prizes for their work. Therefore, as Taylor argues:

> When study from the life model was being offered at the Slade, theoretically at least, as the most vital and stimulating single aspect of an artist's training – it was, in fact, presented in a restricted and stultifying way. To young women students in particular, beset as they must have been with all sorts of socially imposed inhibitions, such a beginning could not have been encouraging to either 'breadth' nor 'freedom.'. . . So great were the unspoken differences between the opportunities for, and expectations of, women and men students . . . that it would seem under no

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[34] Ibid., 23.

[35] Hilary Taylor, " 'If a Young Painter be not Fierce and Arrogant God . . . Help Him': Some Women Art Students at the Slade, c. 1895-9," Art History 9 (1986): 232-44.

> circumstances could, or would, these women have practiced as artists in a way comparable to their male colleagues.[36]

Creative restraint was imposed on women at the Slade who were encouraged to explore stereotypically feminine subject matter as opposed to more challenging themes, such as historical or social subject matter. Describing the work of the British painter Winnifred Matthews who attended the Slade in the late 1890s, Fred Brown observed, "her greatest achievement was, perhaps, the depicting of children and marvellous in their truth and variety are these specimens of her talent," in contrast to her social-realistic depictions of London slums which he described as "one of her least happy peculiarities."[37] Taylor's research regarding the liberal approach to art education associated with the Slade School in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries has confirmed that gender inequalities did result in obstacles for women students. She argues:

> Of the large number of women students at the Slade in these years, few are now known. But: they had somewhat limited opportunities to develop their manual facility within the formal context of the school; the women won fewer prizes; they were discouraged from expressing themselves, in paint, with vigor and forcefulness – qualities much in demand by ambitious artists . . . The subsequent careers of these women reveal varying degrees of achievement, little of it artistic. The alternative to marriage, domestic burdens and artistic oblivion must be to live independently and so avoid these responsibilities. Thus, Gwen John was able to move to Paris . . . and here concentrate on her work without distraction of domesticity. She alone, of this group of artists, has survived with at least a little reputation and a few recognizable paintings to her name.[38]

Like John, McNicoll avoided the confines of domesticity in order to focus her attention on painting. Her choice to live an independent lifestyle at a time when marriage and motherhood were considered the natural destinies of women was a significant transgression of contemporary social mores. It was also a choice made for the sake of her creative and intellectual self-fulfillment. Her decision not to marry, however, was typical of several successful women artists of the period. As ambitious and pioneering women, they understood that marriage would most likely interfere with their professional self-realizations. Marriage was seldom feasible for these women because the responsibilities of managing a home and bearing children made any other pursuit all but impossible. The words of the nineteenth-century sculptor Harriet Hosmer capture the opinion towards marriage shared by many professional women at this time:

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[36] Ibid., 234 -5.
[37] Ibid., 237.
[38] Ibid., 243-44.

> Even if so inclined, an artist has no business to marry. For a man it may be well enough, but for a woman, on whom matrimonial duties and cares weigh more heavily, it is a moral wrong I think, for she must either neglect her profession or her family, becoming neither a good wife nor a good artist. My ambition is to become the latter, so I wage eternal feud with the consolidating knot.[39]

In 1905, McNicoll traveled to the artist colony at St. Ives on the northern Cornish coast of England. St. Ives attracted a number of artists interested in working en plein air, including J.A.M. Whistler and British impressionists such as Gwen and Augustas John.[40] Here McNicoll was able to further augment her training and develop her style while networking with other artists. Several of her paintings depict St. Ives' rugged landscape and seaside views. McNicoll most likely met the painter Dorthea Sharp, with whom she shared a life-long friendship, at St. Ives. The two artists traveled, worked, and shared studio space together for the majority of McNicoll's career. Women partnerships like McNicoll and Sharp's, in which artists lived and worked together, were common in the early-twentieth century.[41] Such relationships, based on shared goals and ambitions, provided women with support and encouragement as they negotiated their careers in a social context generally disapproving of their lifestyles.[42]

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[39] As quoted in Lilian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America (New York, Penguin, 1992), 17.

[40] Marion Whybrow, St Ives 1883 – 1993: Portrait of an Art Colony (England: The Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 1994), 9-16.

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were dominated by intense debates regarding the compatibility of marriage with women's needs for self-fulfillment and, as Deborah Cherry has argued, the tensions between the sexes which were dramatized on the stage and in novels may well have carried over into the viewing of pictures.[43] Certainly, McNicoll's contemporary audience would have been well aware of, and sensitive to, the issues regarding the transitional state of women's social roles, making their ability to interpret The Open Door as an image that addresses such issues undeniable.

McNicoll's own lived experience as a woman whose lifestyle and career embodied the characteristics of the New Woman placed her in an unstable social category where she was confronted with the negotiation of a viable social identity for herself as an independent, transgressive woman. These issues of transition and self-identity are ingrained in the subject matter and composition of The Open Door, as they are in her other representations of women analyzed in this thesis. This painting of a woman on the threshold between the domestic and outside worlds subtly attests to the socio-political struggles of women in the early-twentieth century and is a valuable record of women's cultural history.

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[41] Janice Helland, Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland (England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2000), 123-151.

[42] Since various women artists, and other women professionals, who formed partnerships during this period were homosexual, the possibility of a romantic relationship between McNicoll and Sharp has been speculated. No evidence exists to support or negate this summation. See Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, also Bridget Elliot and Jo-Ann Wallace, eds. Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (im)positionings (London: Routledge, 1994).

[43] Deborah Cherry, Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850-1900 (London: Routledge, 2000), 180.

Chapter 2

Fashion and the Fabrication of Femininity:

Reflection & The Victorian Dress

> Dress is the most fleeting of the arts, prey to the arbitrary dictates of novelty and the attacks of critics, subject to endless speculation – and quite meaningless out of its historical context. It is, on the other hand, the only art that relates so closely to the narrative of our lives, both as individuals and in relation to the wider world; for clothing is simultaneously intensely personal (a reflection of our self-image) and, as fashion, it is . . . 'the mirror of history'.[1]

Reflection and The Victorian Dress (Figures 3 & 4), painted as companion pieces c. 1914, are works concerned with the significance of fashion and dress to feminine identity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries – issues which significantly affected the lived experiences of women like Helen McNicoll. As Pollock has argued, women who were challenging their traditional roles by claiming the spaces of male culture were bound to question and challenge the garments that were almost synonymous with existing gender identities if they were going to change the definitions of woman.[2]

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[1] Aileen Ribeiro, The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France, 1750-1820 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 3.

[2] Grieselda Pollock, Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1998), 58.

This chapter argues that Reflection and The Victorian Dress are not merely decorative images of feminine beauty, a motif which enjoyed tremendous popularity in visual art in the early-twentieth century. In contrast to the depictions of decorous women in interior settings and the female reverie images of the Aesthetic movement which endorsed contemporary notions of women as passive, aesthetic objects, these works challenge the social constructions of femininity prescribed by and perpetuated through fashion and clothing. The following discussion focuses on the definition of ideal femininity, the conflation of women with fashion and clothing, and the manipulation of fashion by supporters of the women's movement for suffrage in Britain during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Considered in these contexts, and in combination with McNicoll's progressive social and professional positions, these images of women yield a complexity of meaning which question traditional notions of ideal femininity and women's roles.

Helen McNicoll did not give these paintings their current titles. They were named by the art galleries that acquired them after her death.[3] The literal descriptions offered by their titles implies that they are decorative works – that McNicoll's artistic intention was simply an exercise in aesthetics and thus these images contain no significant content. However, her choice of imagery belies such a limited interpretation. These works are the result of a deliberate construction intended to denote much more than the trope of woman as decoration. The model is dressed in an outdated fashion worn for parties and evening entertainment some sixty years earlier, yet she is secluded in a domestic, daytime setting. The physically restrictive and cumbersome design of the dress alludes to the socially submissive role women occupied during the Victorian period.[4]

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[3] Reflection was donated to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts by McNicoll's mother in 1922, and The Victorian Dress was donated by A. Sidney Dawes to the Art Gallery of Hamilton in 1958.

McNicoll also complicated the seemingly passive and conventional qualities of these works by presenting the figure in a way which either contradicts, or breaks with, traditional representations of women. The conspicuously fashionable attire worn by the model in The Victorian Dress signifies passive feminine beauty, yet she is engaged with an intellectual activity that renders her oblivious to the viewer's gaze. In Reflection, she wears the same garment and is rendered in a pose reminiscent of the classic iconography of the decorous female. But, in contrast to tradition, she does not turn to view herself in the mirror. She is indifferent to both the eye of the viewer and the lure of her reflection. Iconographically, mirrors have symbolized not only female narcissism, frivolity, and the contemplation of oneself as a work of art, but also introspection and the search for self-identity.[5] The model's serious and thoughtful expression connotes what Pollock has described as 'psychological interiority', underlining the introspective search for self-identity which this work addresses.[6] This is not a representation of decorative beauty or feminine vanity, but rather an image that questions the artificial constructions - artistic and sartorial - which define women as passive, aesthetic objects. That these images, which center on femininity, were created by a woman infuses them with subjective experience and denies the possibility that they are devoid of significant content. McNicoll's focus on clothing, with its 'intensely personal' qualities and its ability to project a reflection of one's self-image, speaks to the issue of self-identity. These works are concerned with the masquerade of femininity which Victorian and Edwardian women were socialized to embody by conforming to the 'arbitrary dictates' of fashion.

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[4] Dr. Anne Lambert, University of Alberta, Department of Human Ecology, personal interview, 19 December 2001. Lambert dated the dress worn by the figure in both images to the mid 1850s. The dress was worn with a hooped crinoline (possibly of the metal variety which was popular at the time) and its bodice was lined with bone. With its layers of flounces, crinoline, and heavily lined bodice the dress weighed approximately seven kilograms. Its off-the-shoulder style indicates that it was a formal evening gown (dresses intended for daily wear were very similar except that the shoulders were not exposed). The model's hair is styled to the fashion of the 1850s in order to match the dress. Finally, the divan in front of which the model stands in TheVictorian Dress is depicted as a mid-Victorian couch. These images intentionally reconstruct the fashionable feminine ideal of the mid-Victorian era, a period in which women's clothing (including corsets, layers of petticoats, heavy skirts, cage crinolines made out of metal wire and hooped with whalebone) was often criticized by feminists, doctors, and dress reformers for its physical restrictiveness and impracticality. Indeed, these garments impeded women's movements and their ability to easily navigate public spaces. Women's clothing served to symbolize and reinforce their subordinate social positions.

[5] Jeffery Howe, "Mirror Symbolism in the Work of Fernand Khnopff," Arts Magazine (September 1978): 112 – 117.

[6] Pollock, 16, 21, 122. Pollock uses the term "psychological interiority" in reference to Mary Cassatt's paintings of women which depict female figures who do not attract an eroticizing gaze, so that the viewer must encounter the woman as a subject, not an object or myth – in contrast to her male contemporaries for whom the beautiful appearance and fashionable surface of woman was the substance of mythic femininity.

Fashion was vital to the endorsement and propagation of definitions of femininity during the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras, and women's identities were inextricably connected to clothing. Fashion always involves more than clothing. Along with the right clothes, the ideal woman also has to present the right body type, face, age, and personality. The fashionable ideal and the feminine ideal evolve together, argues art historian Katrina Rolley, representing a society's definitions of femininity.[7] Victorian ideologies regarding women characterized them as beautiful, submissive, and inactive. The physically restrictive and ornate clothing worn by Victorian women symbolized these characteristics and their socially subordinate positions.

In 1834, Thomas Carlyle wrote that clothes were not simply aesthetic ornaments but emblems of society's hierarchy.[8] He argued that garments signal to the world the role the wearer may be expected to play and remind the wearer of the responsibilities of that role. According to art historian Helene E. Roberts, "the nineteenth century realized that

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The women represented in Cassatt's works convey a combination of thoughts and feelings that insinuate subjectivity.

[7] Katrina Rolley, "Fashion, Femininity, and the Fight for the Vote," Art History 13 (1990): 47.

[8] Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus (New York: Odyssey Press, 1937), 181.

dress performed the function of an identity kit."[9] Although the meaning of ideal womanliness changed from the inactive and asexual 'angel in the house' of the late-nineteenth century to the more independent and sexually aware New Woman of the early-twentieth century, the manifestation of these ideals continued to be predominantly conveyed and reinforced through dress.

The characteristics that constituted the social ideal of womanhood in the Victorian and Edwardian period were based on a complexity of socio-political factors. Growing tensions between public and private sectors during the mid-nineteenth century fostered a reverential attitude toward the home and women, who were ideologically confined to the private realm. Men represented rationality, intellect, progress, and public activity, while women were perceived as interior beings associated with emotions, spirituality, inactivity, and the sanctity of the home. Art historian Julie Anne Springer asserts that this dialectical ideology of gender pervaded nineteenth-century thought:

> The image of the idle female in her remote and quiet drawing room was an antidote to the hurried existence and prosaic pursuits of men. Such associations were common in contemporary essays on women's roles in society.[10]

In his treatise on beauty, in which beauty serves as a metaphor for femininity, the nineteenth-century American essayist Edgar Saltus contended that "where utility and ugliness reign the useless and the beautiful retreat. . . . Beauty's patent of nobility is to be useless."[11] In 1835, the French poet Theophile Gautier posed the question, "what is the use of women's beauty? Like a painting or a piece of music, it is treasured by the author precisely because it has no practical purpose. . . . Nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless; everything useful is ugly."[12] Women were equated with inactivity and their clothing – ornamental, delicate, and beautiful – symbolized the social inertness ideologically imposed on them. By the turn of the twentieth century, ideal femininity represented the antithesis of the modern vulgarities that pervaded the public realm, including work, business, politics, commerce, and urbanization. The male establishment which governed this sphere had shaped the symbol Woman into a mythic creature - as a vehicle for the atonement of their anxieties and the expression of their desires and fantasies. In Springer's words, "woman symbolized elements of beauty unknown to and inaccessible to most men – physical harmony, emotional mystery, the social embodiment of luxury and grace."[13]

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[9] Helene E. Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 2.3 (1977): 555.

[10] Julie Anne Springer, "Art and the Feminine Muse: Women in Interiors by John Alexander White," Woman's Art Journal 6 (1986) : 5.

[11] Edgar Saltus, "The Mystery of Beauty," The Cosmopolitan 2 (1899): 148.

Concurrent with the increasingly rigid separation of public and private spheres during this period were a number of major developments in dress, which distinctly distanced it from the past. The mid-nineteenth century saw a growing divide between the fashionable attire of men and women. Compared to earlier periods, in which both men's and women's clothing was embellished and decorative, men's dress became more sober, plain and very masculine while women's fashions remained ornate. In contrast to the eighteenth century where wealth was equated with leisure and idleness, nineteenth-century men wanted to convey through their dress that they had worked for their money. Women, on the other hand, became consumers of "increasingly complicated and luxurious dress and accessories which [indicated] a life of comparative idleness, secluded in the home." [14] Roberts argues that clothing served to define the role of each sex:

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[12] Theophile Gautier, Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835), trans. Joanna Richardson (New York: Penguin, 1981), 39.
[13] Springer, 5.

> Men were serious (they wore dark colors and little ornamentation), women were frivolous (they wore light pastel colors, ribbons, lace, and bows); men were active (their clothes allowed movement), women were inactive (their clothes inhibited movement); men were strong (their clothes emphasized broad chests and shoulders), women delicate (their clothing accentuated tiny waists, sloping shoulders, and a softly rounded silhouette); men were aggressive (their clothing had sharp definite lines and a clearly defined silhouette), women were submissive (their silhouette was indefinite, their clothing constricting).[15]

A woman's clothing also served the function of displaying the social status and wealth of her husband. A man's ability to support a leisured wife, whose only responsibility was to her appearance, was indicative of his economic affluence. At the end of the nineteenth century, the American economist Thorstein Veblen argued that expensive and wasteful clothing was necessary to create the image of the fashionable idle life, and that men indulged their wives with conspicuously expensive clothes as a tribute to their own wealth.[16] He claimed that it had become women's role to "put into evidence her economic unit's ability to pay. . . . [her place has become] that of a means of conspicuously unproductive expenditure." [17]

Victorian and Edwardian women were socialized from a young age to adhere to the paradigm of ideal femininity, and clothing was a key tool in its acquisition. Throughout the nineteenth century girls as young as eleven years old wore boned, tight-fitting corsets in order to force their bodies to achieve the physical characteristics associated with perfect womanliness as they grew.[18] Mary Somerville, one of the first female mathematicians, describes in her memoirs the ordeal of being trained to wear a corset during her years at an English finishing school for young women:

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[14] Aileen Ribeiro, Dress and Morality, (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers Inc., 1986), 119.
[15] Roberts, 555.
[16] Ribeiro, 15.
[17] As quoted in Roberts, 565.

> Although perfectly straight and well-made, I was encased in stiff stays, with a steel busk in front; while above my frock, bands drew my shoulders back until the shoulder blades met. Then a steel rod with a semi-circle, which went under my chin, was clasped to the steel busk in my stays. In this constrained state I and most of the younger girls had to prepare our lessons.[19]

Clothing which inhibited women's physical movements projected an image of subordination and served to shape submissive female behavior by acting as a constant physical reminder of their restricted social positions. Dress sleeves of the late 1840s were set so low over the shoulder, encasing the arms so tightly, that it was virtually impossible to raise the arm to shoulder height or make a threatening or aggressive gesture.[20] Skirts also inhibited movement. In the 1850s, a fashion critic wrote, "No one but a woman knows how her dress twists about her knees, doubles her fatigue, and arrests her locomotive powers."[21]

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[18] Roberts, 558 –562. Roberts argues that besides the encumbrances of crinolines, trains, and long skirts the item of clothing that directly disciplined women to their submissive role was the corset. The wearing of the laced corset was almost universal in England and North America during the nineteenth century. It was designed to change the configurations of the body to adhere to the period's fetishistic admiration of small waists. The corset exaggerated the differences in male and female anatomy by constricting the waist and enlarging the hips and bust. The ideal waist size varied throughout the century according to the changing proportions of sleeves and skirt which defined the fashionable sillouhette. It was not uncommon for waist sizes to be constricted to 43 centimeters, which demanded severe tight lacing of the corset causing physical weakness, breathing difficulties, muscle fatigue in the back, and curvature of the spine. Roberts contends that the popularity of the corset during the nineteenth century evidences the willingness of Victorian women to conform to a submissive-masochistic pattern of behavior in order to attain the image of ideal femininity. [See also David Kunzle, "Dress Reform as Antifeminism: A Response to Helene E. Roberts "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 2.3 (1977): 571-579.]

[19] Martha Somerville, Personal Reflections from Early Life to Old Age of Mary Somerville (London: John Murray, 1873), 22.

[20] Roberts, 557.

[21] Ibid.

A fashionable woman's attire had the effect of making her appear as though she was incapable of physical effort, underlining the ideological belief that her main role was to be the center of her home, to run her household efficiently, and to look beautiful while doing so. Victorian women were encouraged to internalize these expectations by a flood of etiquette publications offering advice on domestic duties and the most appropriate dress for any given occasion.[22] The feminine characteristics projected by women's clothes – frivolity, delicacy, inactivity, and submissiveness – were also embodied in the heroines of literature and glorified by writers and journalists. John Keats compared his ideal woman to "a milk-white lamb that bleats for man's protection."[23] In 1908, William Makepeace Thackery wrote of the heroine in Coventry Patmore's poem The Angel in the House, " I think it was her weakness which was her principle charm; a kind of sweet submission and softness, which seemed to appeal to each man she met for his sympathy and protection."[24]

Male-devised conventions for representing the female figure in the visual art of the period exemplified the associations of women with passivity, inactivity, and objectified beauty. The motif of women in interiors, along with representations of female reverie, enjoyed great popularity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. As Springer argues:

> For the artist disenchanted with the materialist, empirical, and rational forces operative in society, the interior became a vehicle for expressing spiritual and aesthetic withdrawal. Dreams and visions took precedent over mundane realities as critics and theorists called for an art based on

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[22] Riberio, Dress and Morality, (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1986), 126.
[23] John Keats, "Imitation of Spenser," Poetical Works, ed. H. Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1908), 243.
[24] As quoted in Roberts, 555.

> private feelings and emotions. . . . The feminine subject served the artist as a symbol of the moods of art. Specifically, woman functioned as a metaphor for a world of inner realities – dreams, imagination, intuition, soul – as well as a symbol of exquisite refinement.[25]

For example, the American artist John Alexander White, whose philosophy of art equated repose with beauty, found expression for ideal states of spiritual reverie by painting beautifully dressed women isolated in interiors and voyeristically viewed by the spectator. This concern with the celebration of inactivity as depicted through the distant, inaccessible beauty of women was the preferred motif of the Aesthetic movement, the dominant style in American and British painting at the turn of the twentieth century until it fell out of favor with the advent of Modernism. During this period, women assumed a passive role as formal elements in decorative easel paintings. Whistlerian titles such as "Study in . . ." established the artist's intention to submerge the actuality of women beneath the aesthetic concerns for color and composition (Figures 7 & 8).[26] The dominant social constructions of woman as leisure-bound and ornamental, as evidenced and reinforced through women's fashions, made her decorative function in art appropriate. "Due to their perceived lack of importance in society," claims art historian Bailey Van Hook, "only women could easily function as passive decorations."[27]

In both Reflection and The Victorian Dress, McNicoll chose to depict the model in a style reminiscent of the imagery of the Aesthetic movement and in clothing that epitomized notions of femininity as passive and inactive. However, her position as a professional, independent woman who transgressed the ideologies which such female imagery endorsed prevents these works from being read in such a sexist context. That

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[25] Springer, 2.
[26] Bailey Van Hook, Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society. 1876-1914 (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 2.
[27] Ibid., 12.

McNicoll would have chosen to depict Woman as a decorative object, extending the restrictive definition of femininity embodied in the imagery of the Aesthetic movement, demeans her intellectual agency by implying that she was simply mimicing conventional styles without concern for her own creative contributions. McNicoll deliberately based these works on a style of clothing which contemporary audiences would have recognized as exemplifying a period in which women's social positions and opportunities were especially limited. If she were simply attempting to construct an image of aesthetic beauty, she could have represented the model in a contemporary dress. This choice implies McNicoll's conscious attempt to complicate a traditional mode of representation. This was a woman who dedicated her life to the achievement of goals that displaced traditional ideologies regarding women's roles and these factors must be integrated into the interpretation of her work.

Reflection and The Victorian Dress exemplify McNicoll's ability to subtly intervene in the androcentric visual vocabulary with which she was forced to work in order to question and challenge the feminine stereotypes that it conveyed. McNicoll's decision to portray the figure in Reflection with her back to the mirror is especially indicative of her attempt to destabilize traditional iconographic meaning. A few years earlier, Algernon Talmage, McNicoll's teacher at the St. Ives artist colony, painted a work called The Mackeral Shawl in which a young woman admires her reflection in a mirror. Reflection, which incorporates the cape and the mirror, can be viewed as a provocative response to that painting. McNicoll's image mediates the association of woman with vanity and aesthetic ornamentation.

According to art historian Jeffrey Howe, "vanitas associations are perhaps never absent from a picture which involves mirrors and women. At times this imagery was combined with the theme of self discovery in its archtypical form: original sin."[28] In this context, the image of a woman with a mirror connotes a variety of misogynistic meaning which characterize her as vain and narcissistic (Figures 9 & 10). McNicoll's positioning of the figure in Reflection refuses these connotations. The mirror, with all of its disparaging feminine associations, still lingers behind her, but she does not submit herself to the feminine stereotypes which it represents. The figure's introspective and almost absent expression alludes to her mental detachment from the physical surroundings. She is not enjoying her appearance in the overly ornate and decorative dress which envelopes her. Her body is not offered to the viewer for aesthetic delectation. Rather, she sits with her shoulders hunched and hands clasped securely in front of her, the shawl covering most of her bare skin. Given McNicoll's personal struggle for professional success, combined with the destabilization of women's roles and definitions of femininity which women like herself were inducing, the mirror signifies concerns for questions of feminine identity.[29] The struggle of women artists during this period to represent themselves, as well as to produce meanings of their own, implies a concern with issues of self-identity.

McNicoll's portrayal of the figure reading in The Victorian Dress is also an intervention into dominant modes of representation in order to challenge negative definitions of femininity. This image speaks to women's intellectual capabilities and alludes to the expanded social opportunities which they were in the process of claiming when this image was painted. Grieselda Pollock argues that it was a transgression to show a middle-class, or any woman, engaged in an intellectual activity in the visual art of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, yet:

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[28] Howe, 116.

[29] Ibid., 112-116. In Romantic and Symbolist imagery, which shares a deep concern for questions of consciousness and personal identity, mirrors were used to signify the soul of the artist. In 1891, the Symbolist artist Camille Au Clair described consciousness itself as a mirror. Howe argues that since mirrors have a long and rich tradition of evoking questions of identity in art, literature, and philosophy, they prove an apt symbol for an artist's search for self. There did exist an artistic tradition for the use of mirrors in this context, and given that McNicoll studied at the Slade School of Fine Art where many of the instructors were New Romantics, her knowledge of this tradition is very likely.

> . . . a woman reading was paradoxically one of the paradigmatic images of a *negative*, feminine relation to modernity. From Fragonard to Van Gogh, women appeared as readers of novels in paintings of modern life. The advanced novels of the time, like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), exposed the woman reader as silly and susceptible to sentimental fiction in an implied contrast to the disciplined rationalism of the modernist male author.[30]

Pollock offers two examples of works by Mary Cassatt that center on women reading and which contrast and challenge negative representations of women's intellectual capabilities, evidencing the ability of women artists to intervene in dominant modes of representation in a critical way. In Le Figaro of 1878, Cassatt portrays her mother reading a newspaper (Figure 11). Pollock argues that the artist's identity as a woman disturbs the traditional connotations associated with women and reading by "producing an image which shows one woman, yet invites us to imagine the presence of her daughter painting her."[31] In this way, the woman's intellectual strength is reinforced by the fact that a creative, intelligent woman produced the image. In Nurse Reading to a Little Girl, painted in 1880, Cassatt shows an adult woman encouraging a young girl's intellectual growth and creative development.[32]

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[30] Grieselda Pollock, Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 134.

[31] Ibid., 136.

Like Cassatt, McNicoll represented women reading in several of her works. It was a theme which obviously held significant meaning for her. And, like Cassatt's use of the theme, the image of the woman reading in The Victorian Dress serves to imply the figure's intellectual identity. Because this work was designed as a companion piece to Reflection, the critical and self-analytical quality of that image is sustained in The Victorian Dress. The two works are engaged in a dialogue which addresses the artificiality of social constructions of femininity realized through clothing, as well as the negative associations of femininity endorsed in androcentric iconography. Again, McNicoll depicts the woman in the costume of passive and decorous femininity, but she disrupts this convention by representing the figure as a subjective, intellectual individual. That sense of intellectualism, self-awareness, and creativity is transferred onto the figure by the presence and actuality of the intelligent woman who created her.

In addition to McNicoll's own interventions, the socio-political context in which she was a part at the time Reflection and The Victorian Dress were painted enriches the significance of her depiction of clothing. In 1910, the author of a book entitled Woman as Decoration insisted that women owed it to themselves, their families, and the public to be as decorative as possible in any given situation.[33] Women attained this ideal of decorative femininity through fashionable clothing. For Victorian and Edwardian feminists who challenged this definition of femininity, dress was a contentious issue and women's fashions were blamed as one of the factors which contributed to their subordinate social positions. The musician Natalie Bauer Lechner, who believed that women's emancipation and clothing reform must come simultaneously, wrote in 1907, "as long as I can see that females allow themselves to be bound and tyrannized by their clothing, I have no faith in their emancipation."[34] Paradoxically, the fashionable ideal which women were encouraged to attain was also attacked and criticized by those who perpetuated it. Ribeiro contends that women's clothes, in their expense and variety, were viewed as indicative of:

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[32] Ibid., 139.
[33] Emily Burbank, Woman as Decoration (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1910), 13.

> narcissism and superficiality in the same way as in the past female beauty was a satanic temptation to men, women were admired for it and yet denounced for it . . . . It is women on the whole who during the nineteenth century bear the brunt of the attacks on their clothing.[35]

In his essay The Painter of Modern Life, Baudelaire described woman as a kind of idol, bewitching but stupid, her only real talent being for dress, "the muslins, the gauzes, the vast iridescent clouds of stuff in which she envelopes herself."[36]

Given the historicity of the ideological conflation of femininity with clothing in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, McNicoll's representation of the fashionable feminine ideal in Reflection and The Victorian Dress demands an analysis which recognizes the complexity of meanings which such images can sustain. The ubiquity of notions regarding women's sartorial appearance and its association with feminine identity would have enabled McNicoll's contemporary audience, especially her female peers who were claiming new social positions, to extract meaning relating to feminine identity in these two works. Adding to the involved content such images of femininity could sustain is the politicization of fashion by early-twentieth century feminists, as well as its implication as a key element in women's social subordination during the period in which McNicoll worked. Many women like McNicoll who were challenging traditional definitions of femininity and women's social roles manipulated fashion in their attempts to represent femininity on their own terms. Women's fashions and the negative feminine stereotypes they connoted were criticized by feminists and those who supported women's social emancipation during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. These historical realities, combined with McNicoll's lived experience as a women who challenged the stereotype of feminine passivity evoked by women's fashions in the Victorian period, necessitates an interpretation of Reflection and The Victorian Dress which concedes feminist meaning.

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[34] As quoted in Mary L. Wagener, "Fashion and Feminism in Fin de Siecle Vienna," Woman's Art Journal 10.2 (1989): 32.
[35] Ribeiro, 117, 119.
[36] As quoted in Ribeiro, 132.

With the emergence of an organized women's movement in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, the fashionable clothing which symbolized women's subordination, along with the arguments that women's intellectual faculties were only capable of sartorial concerns, came under attack by feminists, as well as men who supported the idea of equality between the sexes. In an 1853 publication criticizing the double standards practiced by men in regards to their views on women's vanity, an anonymous commentator wrote, "men, it continues, make women a 'play toy and not a companion', encouraging their interest in dress so that they become just exquisitely dressed puppets."[37] A few years later, a similar sentiment was expressed by Francis Power Cobbe, who advocated higher standards of education for women. He argued that women developed by expanding their intellects, "not by pinching them in mental stays. . . . Such processes produce dolls, not women."[38]

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[37] As quoted in Ribeiro, 132.

Such opinions, combined with a growing concern amongst the medical community that women's clothing, particularly the corset, were unhygenic and caused health problems, prompted the formation of a number of dress reform initiatives and movements. In the early 1850s, the American Amelia Bloomer introduced the Bloomer. The costume consisted of a knee-length tunic and Turkish trousers, designed to allow women more freedom of movement than long skirts. However, this more practical alternative to women's attire provoked a storm of critical comments. "Linked as this costume was to women's rights," notes Ribeiro, " its wearers were depicted as bossy harridens assuming masculine airs" (Figure 12 & 13).[39] The debate over dress reform continued into the late-nineteenth century with The Rational Dress Association emerging in 1882. This American movement continued Bloomer's dress conception by advocating bifurcated garments either in the form of divided skirts or pants.[40] It was a popularly held opinion amongst dress reformers that some form of bifurcated garment was healthier and more practical than dragging around layers of petticoats and long skirts. Moral arguments were also introduced, with some dress reformers contending that it was immoral to spend vast amounts of money on ever-changing fashionable clothing. Radical dress reformers blamed men for using fashion to incite lust and degrade women. Ribeiro argues that "at best [fashion] had ensured that women's minds were occupied by frivolity and not by more weighty matters."[41]

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ribeiro, 144.
[40] Ibid., 144.
[41] Ibid., 144.

Constrictive and overly ornate clothing was an important target for feminist criticism. By the turn of the twentieth century, the women's movement in North America and Europe was burgeoning, and with the increased educational and professional opportunities which were being claimed by women, the need for comfortable and practical clothing increased. Feminist dress reformers argued that a woman's dress should fit the figure and activity of the wearer, not her husband's income. Suggestions for the improvement of women's clothing were many and diverse, but they were generally based on a common objective: to create a style that represented women as active and capable participants in public and private life, in contrast to the decorative objects insinuated by contemporary fashionable dress. According to art historian Mary L. Wagner, the proposals for changing women's fashions offered by feminist dress reformers included:

> creating a feminine garment for working women that would be practical and pretty for their dual functions of housewife or worker; abolishing useless decorations such as buttons that buttoned nothing, bows that tie nothing, and other superfluous frills; accepting trousers as suitable everyday apparel, not just for specific activities or occupations; abandoning the idea that women must first attract then dominate men to gain status (thus abolishing the need for erotic and constricting clothing); and freeing women from the tyranny of fashion by encouraging them to select for personal needs, taking into account age, occupation, figure and attitude. These suggestions were appealing but too radical for most readers.[42]

Fear of social disapproval was the main reason why more practical attire for women was not popularized, despite the fact that a number of women championed these alternative designs. The critical response received by women brave enough to wear practical fashions like the Bloomer in public indicates that any attempt by women to take control of, or shape, feminine identity according to their own needs was considered a severe threat to established norms. Any apparent transgression of acceptable feminine appearances was harshly condemned, and the women who challenged these ideologically entrenched paradigms were accused of being unnatural and masculinized. The association between dress reform and the women's movement continued, and by the turn of the twentieth century any woman depicted in rational dress was automatically assumed to be a feminist. The ideological correlation between feminists and a style of dress considered masculine was used by anti-feminists to argue that women's rights advocates were unnatural women, and that their socio-political demands were symptomatic of their abnormal conditions. Between 1902 and 1914, the second and most volatile phase of the women's suffrage movement in Britain and the period in which McNicoll was working, the principal argument used to undermine and ridicule suffragists by their opponents was that real women did not want or need the vote. Anti-suffragists capitalized on the associations between suffragists and unnatural femininity by caricaturing them as deviant gender anomalies in opposition to ideal womanliness in the popular press, literature, and the theatre (Figures 14 & 15). The following description offered by theatre historians Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell emphasizes the powerful association between women and clothing at this time:

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[42] Wagener, 31.

> Big boots, cropped hair, ties, collars, blue spectacles, and murderous umbrellas were, off-stage as well as on, a convenient shorthand for the unusual woman, a would-be man who, like "real" men, had no fashion sense. According to such arguments, a woman's desire to participate in public life meant intruding herself into male territory, a trespass accompanied by rejection of femininity and consequent assumption of

> what were agreed to be "male" characteristics, signaled most immediately through dress.[43]

As ideals of fashionable womanhood shifted through the period from a shapely, dainty silhouette to a taller more slender figure, anti-suffrage iconography adjusted in response, always emphasizing an opposition between natural femininity and the deviant woman who asserted her social rights. Rolley notes how ideal femininity and the independent woman were portrayed as antithetical by anti-suffragists:

> When the ideal woman is voluptuous, the caricature must be skinny, and when the 'real' woman is slender, the suffragette is fat. She remains masculine, since masculinity is always in opposition to femininity.[44]

In both written and visual anti-suffrage propaganda, clothing and details of appearance were used to signal deviation from or adherence to the feminine ideal. Often, debates regarding suffrage directly conflated women with their clothing. Anti-suffragist Francis Latham lamented the possibility of a 'petticoat-elected cabinet', the press described suffrage demonstrations as 'processions of petticoats', and discord between suffragists was 'clearly a case of divided skirts'.[45] Since a woman's clothing identified her to such an extent, cartoonists for *Punch* often depicted suffragists using suitably attired mannequins.[46]

In response to the negative representation of suffragists as masculine and unattractive, leaders of the women's suffrage campaign attempted to present an image of themselves as fashionable and feminine (Figure 16). As the suffragist Cicely Hamilton commented, "a curious characteristic of the militant suffragette movement was the importance it attached to dress and appearance, and its insistence on the feminine note."[47] In contrast to the opinions of their opponents, Edwardian feminists did not wish to be men. Indeed, many suffragists argued that women's distinctive characteristics, particularly their 'superior' morality, would benefit society and thus based their arguments for women's enfranchisement on the *differences* between the sexes; feminine traits such as nurturing, caring, and moral purity would help eradicate various social ills.

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[43] Joel H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 153.
[44] Rolley, 67.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 48.

The suffragists adopted an extremely feminine style of dress for their public appearances in order to counter negative representations of the masculine suffragist. Suffrage leaders encouraged their supporters to dress as fashionably as possible. "Many women were suffragettes in deviance to their families, their natural impulses, and even the law," notes Rolley, "to counter this they needed an extremely positive image of the suffrage societies they supported and of themselves as members."[48] Since women were socialized to influence men rather than reason with them, suffragists hoped that presenting a feminine image would help reassure and persuade men into accepting female suffrage. White dresses were chosen as the uniform for public suffrage protests and processions, intended to serve as a unifying symbol and as an indicator of feminine purity (Figures 17 & 18).

Suffragists employed fashion as a political tactic. They used the associations between women and clothing to manipulate public opinion and persuade their opponents. They also used fashion as a means of defining femininity in their own terms. The movement for women's suffrage and the challenges to established notions of femininity which it induced dominated the socio-political context in which McNicoll painted Reflection and The Victorian Dress. The destabilization of traditional definitions of femininity and women's roles was not only incited by suffragists. Any woman who pursued self-fulfillment through education and/or a career, or who chose independence over marriage and maternity during this period, was confronted with a controversial social identity. Issues of self-identity and the construction of an acceptable social persona significantly informed the lived experiences of women like McNicoll. Clothing, with its powerful influence on the creation of women's self-perceptions, as well its politically-charged role in the first decades of the twentieth century, was a significant factor in the fabrication of a viable social identity for women at this time. Lisa Tickner's analysis regarding the public's sensitivity to women's appearance during the time McNicoll worked in England captures the forceful effect clothing and fashion had on the understanding of femininity:

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[47] Cicely Hamilton, Life Errant (London: Dent, 1935), 75.
[48] Rolley, 59.

> . . . the Victorian and Edwardian public expected to see the virtues and vices of femininity written on the body, and were coached by moralists, novelists, journalists, illustrators and the writers of etiquette manuals in the detailed interpretation of physiognomy, gesture and pose. . . . The depiction of a recognisably 'womanly' woman - that is, recognisable by the traits through which she was conventionally defined - . . . carried an impact that written description could never convey. The image, striking and condensed like a slogan, could cut through the fine detail of political argument and impress itself directly on even the illiterate, the uneducated or the casual passer by.[49]

The image of a fashionably dressed woman was laden with social and political significance, and in this context McNicoll's representations of women in modish attire would have evoked various meanings for different audiences. McNicoll's intervention in a conventional, androcentric mode of representation in Reflection and The Victorian Dress would have been perceivable to many viewers, particularly her female peers. The issues of women's social identity and constructions of femininity which these two works subtly address through their composition and subject matter would not have gone unnoticed in a socio-political milieu which was inundated with text and imagery concerning these debates. In order to fully appreciate the function of McNicoll's representations of women and to recognize the complexity of significations encoded in these works, conventional assumptions regarding the work of women artists in the early-twentieth century must be displaced. McNicoll's choice of subject matter must be considered in the context of her historical moment, as informed by her socio-political environment and motivated by an autonomous and critical intellect.

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[49] Lisa Tickner, The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1904-14 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 151.

Chapter 3

At the Center of Women's Intellectual and Creative Production:

The Chintz Sofa

> Many studies of 'Victorian' art carefully screen out anything even mildly tinged with political debate and the women's movement is regularly evaded. Much has been invested in interpretations that do not challenge the asymmetries of power, either now or then. Major exhibitions and publications often decline to acknowledge women as artists, or minimise their contribution. If it is still so challenging to accept women's art as an effective presence in culture and women as active agents, it is perhaps not unsurprising that feminism remains beyond the frame, as a politics and as a heterogeneous discursive field for considering the work of artists, male or female.[1]

Deborah Cherry's assessment regarding the continued marginalization and misunderstanding of women's art due to a disturbing reluctance to recognize women as active agents – either in contemporary or historical contexts – rings especially true when it comes to the treatment Helen McNicoll's work has received by Canadian critics and scholars. This chapter will center on a discussion of The Chintz Sofa (Figure 5), painted c. 1913, and challenge the conventional interpretation of McNicoll's work as passive reflections of Edwardian femininity. The subject matter of this painting will be viewed through the perspective of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century feminism, focusing on the women's movement and the changing definition of femininity which dominated the lived experiences of professional women during this period. McNicoll's choice of subject matter was a deliberate one, intended to articulate her perceptions of Edwardian society as an independent woman rather than merely perpetuate notions of traditional femininity by mimicking established painting conventions. By bringing feminism and the women's movement 'into the frame', this chapter will destabilize the understanding of this image as an extension of inactive femininity while stressing the strategy of women artists in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods to intervene in and manipulate androcentric visual language in order to produce meanings of their own.

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[1] Deborah Cherry, Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850-1900 (London: Routledge, 2000), 7.

The following discussion will deconstruct the imagery used in The Chintz Sofa, emphasizing McNicoll's deliberate construction of socio-political meaning. Her depiction of embroidery will be viewed in the context of its utilization as a political tool by British suffragists. As well, McNicoll's choice to depict her friend and colleague Dorothea Sharp, the model for this work, in a white dress will be linked to the iconography of the British suffrage campaign. The painting's setting also serves to place this work within the context of early-twentieth century feminism, as does McNicoll and Sharp's friendship. The importance of women's partnerships and networks to the practice of women artists at the turn of the twentieth century is exemplified by their relationship. All of these factors would have been recognized by McNicoll's contemporary audience as signifying socio-political meaning. By refusing the ahistorical, gendered interpretations of late-twentieth century critics who deny McNicoll's creative agency, this chapter validates the socio-political meaning inherent in The Chintz Sofa.

Traditional characterizations of femininity are encoded in this painting's representation of needlework, and have influenced its contemporary interpretation as a purely decorative image. The painting's subject matter has been considered a *reflection* of traditional feminine activity, rather than an active presentation of women's social experiences at the time it was created. Writing for the Montreal Gazette in 2000, Henry Lehmann stated that The Chintz Sofa, "like many other works by McNicoll, seems divided between a modernist love of pure paint and an attraction to Victorian subject matter that was already considered corny by the turn of the twentieth century."[2] By describing her work as concerned with a 'modernist love of pure paint', Lehmann implies that representational content was not a concern for McNicoll. Lehmann also diminishes the significance of her style and subject matter by describing it as outdated. A writer for the Hamilton Spectator was blunter in her refusal to consider content as significant in The Chintz Sofa by referring to it as a:

> typical scene of [femininity], which has always conveyed a nonthreatening and idealized world. . . . Here again McNicoll refers to a traditional subject: a woman engaged in feminine work indoors. The model has been identified as Dorothea Sharp. Since Sharp was not a domesticated type, curator Natalie Luckyj attempts to reconcile the apparent contradiction by suggesting she is embroidering a suffragist slogan on a handkerchief. But is it necessary to invent a story? This is 20th century impressionism, not Victorian narrative art.[3]

Yes, this is twentieth-century impressionism, but McNicoll's work cannot be viewed as a mimetic extension of an androcentric artistic movement. Merely positioning her work within the modernist narrative diminishes her intellectual agency and creative contributions. Feminist research has established women's unique experience of modernity, informed by a different socio-political position than their male contemporaries. Impressionism validated the spaces of femininity as legitimate subject matter for painting, enabling women artists to articulate their own perceptions and experiences of modern life by intervening in a male-dominated visual vocabulary.[4] The Chintz Sofa does just this, speaking directly to issues of early-twentieth century feminism.

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[2] Henry Lehmann, "Montrealer was on Cutting Edge: Helen McNicoll was Influenced by Trends, but her Talent was Original," Montreal Gazette (7 October 2000).

[3] Regina Haggo, "Reviving a Faded Glory", Hamilton Spectator (13 November 1999).

The setting of The Chintz Sofa is McNicoll's London studio, which she shared with her friend and colleague Dorothea Sharp. The view from their window was of a busy urban environment. An impression of the city's skyline, which serves as a subtle acknowledgement of the modern metropolis in which McNicoll negotiated her personal and professional life, hovers over the central figure as she sits embroidering. The painting's setting is vital to its positioning within the context of early-twentieth century feminism. McNicoll and Sharp's studio was located at Six Gordon Square in London's West End.[5] It was only a short distance to the Slade School of Fine Art, the National Gallery, and the British Museum, all of which were important meeting places for those interested in women's art and women's politics during this period.[6] Numerous women painters, sculptors, writers, students, and activists worked, studied, and resided in this area. London's West End was a crucial site for the development of urban feminism and the organized promotion of women's art (see Appendix 2).[7] In the mid-nineteenth century, an alliance between women artists and the newly-organized women's movement developed in this densely-populated district, and it continued to be a hub of artistic and intellectual activity into the first decades of the twentieth century, with Gordon Square becoming the center of the Bloomsbury group of writers and artists.[8] McNicoll participated in the progressive activities that burgeoned in this locale. In a letter written to her father in 1913, McNicoll describes how she, her cousin Dolly McNicoll, and Dorothea Sharp mounted an exhibition of their work which was attended by members of the local art community:

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[4] See Griselda Pollock, Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998), Norma Broude, Impressionism: A Feminist Reading (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), and Tamar Garb, Women Impressionists, (Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1986).

[5] Natalie Luckyj, Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999), 25.

[6] Cherry, 21.

[7] Lynne Walker, "Vistas of Pleasure: Women Consumers of Urban Space in the West End of London, 1850-1900," Women in the Victorian Art World, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 71-74. As Walker confirms, the West End of London was the site of an extensive women's community, including social networks, alliances, and organizations of the women's movement. Many leaders of the movement, including Emmeline Pankhurst, Barbara Bodichon, Emily Davies, Elizabeth Garett Anderson, and Agnes and Rhoda Garrett, lived in this district and maintained feminist organizations

> We had a show here on Sunday. I mean at the studio. Dolly sent out many invitations. A good many couldn't come but there were quite enough – about 57 people came. Six candidates [for election to the Royal Society of British Artists] were amongst the people.[9]

The show was held only a month before McNicoll's election to the RBA, which indicates not only her active involvement in the local art scene but also her calculated and controlled attempt to secure her professional success. In a photograph that accompanied a Montreal Daily Star article announcing McNicoll's election to the RBA, easels and works-in-progress are shown amongst the essential furnishings (Figure 19).[10] The

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from their homes. Emmeline Pankhurst used her house in Russell Square, Bloomsbury, to hold suffrage meetings, such as the conference of the Woman's Franchise League in 1891. Barbara Bodichon adapted her family home in Blandford Square as a power base from which to recruit and support women for a variety of feminist campaigns. Dr. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson set up her famous Women's Hospital on sites throughout the West End. The Englishwoman's Journal, the principal paper of the British women's movement, and The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women were also located in this area.

[8] Cherry, 21.

[9] Helen McNicoll, London, England, to David McNicoll, Montreal, Canada, 19 March 1913, Artists' Files, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

[10] "Miss McNicoll Now a Member of Royal Art Society," Montreal Daily Star (2 April 1913). The article appeared on the newspaper's society page, and is written in a tone that treats McNicoll's important achievement as a trivial event in the life of a local socialite. It states that McNicoll "has lived in London for many years, sharing a studio with another girl artist who is also a member of the R.B.A." The patronizing language used to describe a professional woman's circumstances is typical of the condescending media coverage women artists received in Canada during this period.

photograph speaks to the creative ambitions McNicoll and Sharp shared and to the encompassing effect it had on their lives. The Chintz Sofa sat at the center of a site of artistic production and culture; it was a site of women's intellectual activity. The *location* and *function* of the setting challenges the interpretation of this work as devoid of significant content, merely reflecting a traditional image of inactive femininity.

The figure seated on the floral print divan also suggests that The Chintz Sofa can sustain a more complex and multi-layered analysis. She has been identified as Dorothea Sharp, on the basis of a photograph of Sharp working en-plein-air taken by McNicoll c. 1908 (Figure 20).[11] The photograph shows her in front of two easels placed side by side, an arrangement that is symbolic of the relationship she and McNicoll shared. Their friendship was an important and influential aspect of McNicoll's personal and professional life. Natalie Luckyj has argued that:

> Sharp's active involvement with the Society of Women Artists in London as both an exhibitor (since 1902) and vice-president, and the constant presentation of her work in Royal Academy exhibitions, the Paris Salon, and other provincial sites undoubtedly encouraged McNicoll to show her own work publicly.[12]

Sharp's ambitious professional negotiations were on par with McNicoll's. Undoubtedly, the two women offered support and encouragement to one another. They also recognized the importance of supporting a wider network of women artists, as McNicoll exhibited with the Society of Women Artists as well.[13] The SWA was founded in 1857 by Harriet Grote who had links to a network of egalitarian feminists.[14] It was established to provide exhibition and networking opportunities for the increasing numbers of women artists in the mid-nineteenth century. Artists connected to the women's movement exhibited with the society, including Eliza Fox, Margaret Gilles, and Emily Ford.[15] Sharp's prominent position within an organization founded on feminist principles and closely linked to the women's movement demonstrates McNicoll and Sharp's involvement in feminist activity. It also shows that McNicoll's social milieu included a network of women artists, many of whom were involved in the women's movement.

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[11] Natalie Luckyj, Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999), 63. Luckyj has argued that the figure depicted in The Chintz Sofa is most likely Dorothea Sharp. The close amicable and professional relationship they shared renders the likelihood of Sharp posing for McNicoll extremely plausible. As Luckyj noted, McNicoll relied on Sharp to negotiate the hiring of models because of her hearing disability. The idea that Sharp would have, on occasion, served as a model for McNicoll is a logical summation. Luckyj also pointed out that, like McNicoll and Sharp, Florence Carlyle and Judith Hastings formed a long-standing friendship in which Hastings served as a model for several of Carlyle's paintings. A tradition of women artists depicting their admired friends and colleagues - not always through identifiable portraits - has been well established by researchers such as Deborah Cherry, Janice Hellend, and Bridget Elliot.

[12] Ibid., 42.

McNicoll and Sharp's friendship exemplifies the positive influence female friendships had on the lives and careers of women artists in the early-twentieth century. Relationships of this nature, in which unmarried professional women formed life-long partnerships, were an important aspect of women's culture during this period.[16] By not marrying, women artists chose independence, enabling them to establish their own priorities, pursue their careers, and set their own agendas. During the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras, an extensive network of independent women artists, often sharing lodgings or studio space with one another, existed in artistic areas of North and West

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[13] Ibid., 48.

[14] Deborah Cherry, "Women Artists and the Politics of Feminism, 1850-1900," Women in the Victorian Art World, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 55. Egalitarian feminism, or equity feminism, was an ideology connected to both the British and Canadian women's movements of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries which focused directly on arguments of simple justice. It was a viewpoint that stressed how much women were like men in almost every capacity, and how unfair it was that they should have fewer rights. Egalitarian feminists advocated equality between the sexes in every sphere of social and political activity.

[15] Ibid., 54.

[16] Janice Helland, Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth Century Scotland: Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure (Hants: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2000), 123-151.

London.[17] McNicoll and Sharp were surrounded by women who shared personal and professional partnerships such as theirs. Their friendship provided them not only a relationship based on equality, but one of shared frustrations, experiences, and goals. Acknowledgement of this reality infuses The Chintz Sofa's subject matter with personal experience. It cannot be viewed simply as an aesthetic portrayal. Sharp's position as a prominent professional artist and the relationship she and McNicoll shared enriches the painting's subject matter and places it within a context of actual lived experiences.

The Chintz Sofa was painted at the height of the militant suffrage movement in Britain. This was a period in which suffrage activity was widely publicized in the media. Suffrage propaganda was extensively disseminated in the form of posters, sideboards, postcards, and the physical presence of women in public spaces holding meetings and protests. Suffrage demonstrations, in which thousands of women representing different classes and occupations marched through the streets of London, were a regular occurrence between 1905 and 1914. The suffrage campaign and the debate over the definition of femininity which it induced became the subject of novels, plays, and visual art.[18] The 'woman question' pervaded the discourses of law, politics, and medicine. Anti-suffragists also fueled the debate and kept the suffrage campaign well publicized by producing anti-suffrage newspapers, posters, and postcards of their own. McNicoll's immersion in this historical context and her connection to the women's movement accentuates the socio-political content of The Chintz Sofa. McNicoll's choice to depict Sharp in a way that mirrors the image of the Edwardian suffragist speaks directly to the feminist activity that thrived at the time she painted this image.

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[17] Deborah Cherry, Paintings Women: Victorian Women Artists (London: Routledge, 1993), 48.

[18] The campaign was supported by many writers. In 1908, the Women Writers Suffrage League was founded by the journalist, playwright, and novelist Cicely Hamilton, and journalist Bessie Hatton. Its president was Elizabeth Robins who under the pseudonym 'C. E. Raimond' had written several novels. Her 1907 play, Votes for Women, was highly influential. Other supporters included May Sinclair, Alice Meynell, Sarah Grand, Richard West, and Violet Hunt. Suffragists were widely portrayed in the literature of the period; see Virginia Woolf's Night and Day, H.G. Well's Ann Veronica, and George Bernard Shaw's Press Cuttings. Accounts of the movement were also written by leading feminists, including Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and E. Pethick-Lawrence. The campaign produced many periodicals, including Women's Suffrage Journal, The Common Cause, Votes for Women, and Women's Dreadnought.

McNicoll's portrayal of Sharp absorbed in needlework signifies a complexity of meaning that relates directly to the women's suffrage movement. Needlework is inextricably connected to traditional ideologies of femininity, maternity, and women's domestic roles. With the rigid ideological separation of public and private spheres which occurred in the nineteenth century, needlework became a hallmark of passive femininity. But its association with femininity was also manipulated by early-twentieth century feminists to celebrate women's culture. British suffragists employed needlework as a politically-subversive tool. Embroidered banners glorifying women's history and achievements were a principle component of suffrage demonstrations, marches, and meetings. Fashion was also utilized by the suffragists as a political weapon. White was chosen as one of the main suffrage colors and white dresses were adopted as a uniform for suffrage demonstrations and marches.

The Chintz Sofa is a work that addresses a number of feminist concerns dealing with the collusion of women's art practice and feminist politics in the early-twentieth century. Symbols of women's culture and their quest for social and political equality during this period are subtly ingrained in this painting's iconography. It should be viewed as an historical artifact of women's culture, embedded with meaning that centers on the socio-political experiences of Edwardian women. To recognize these meanings, stereotypical notions of femininity and women's art must be displaced. McNicoll's active participation in her historical context and her contemporary audience's ability to recognize the socio-political meanings of her work must be accounted for. Considering the conclusions drawn from research on McNicoll's work up to now, this has proved to be a formidable task.

As noted in the introduction, the emergence of the women's movement in the 1970s resulted in a desire to recover the work and careers of historical Canadian women artists, whose contributions had been erased by the masculine biases that dominated the writing of art's history. In her 1989 Master's thesis on the work of Canadian women artists between 1890 and 1930, Julia Gualitieri asserted:

> Canadian women artists, in particular, have been eclipsed outright. They have been affected doubly for being women and Canadian. If recognition has been slow for women artists, it has been even slower for Canadian historical women artists. What research has been done remains within the traditional limits of Art History's frameworks – biographical details and stylistic analysis with no reference to the wider issues of second generation feminist analysis.[19]

The social and political contexts in which historical women artists were immersed, and how these contexts influenced their artistic training, professional careers, personal lives, and subject matter are the 'wider issues' which must be addressed when studying the work of historical women artists. A socio-political examination of this nature has never been conducted on Helen McNicoll's career, despite the fact that she lived and worked during a period and in a location in which women's art practice became inextricably linked with politics. McNicoll's oeuvre is dominated by images that center on women's experiences and women's culture, yet a critical analysis of their meaning in a feminist context has not been undertaken.

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[19] Julia Gualitieri, "Woman as Artist and as Subject in Canadian Painting (1890-1930): Florence Carlyle, Laura Muntz Lyall, and Helen McNicoll," M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1989, 5.

A comprehensive examination of McNicoll's oeuvre was conducted by Natalie Luckyj in an exhibition curated for the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1999, called Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist, a title that emphasizes an art style rather than a practice. In the exhibition's catalogue, Luckyj surveys McNicoll's career from her early training in Canada to the end of her life in England. An entire section is devoted to a discussion of the social and political contexts in which McNicoll lived and worked. Luckyj acknowledges McNicoll's position amongst the first women to gain access to higher education and the professions during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The women's suffrage movement, both in Canada and in England, is noted by Luckyj as being an important factor in the socio-political context that formed the backdrop to McNicoll's development as a young woman and as an artist. She argues, furthermore, that:

> The challenge for feminist art historians today is to reconstruct the complex and multilayered social and artistic contexts that made the practice of McNicoll and her contemporaries possible. Only by recovering their work *and* the lived experience of women artists like McNicoll, can we begin to explore the ways in which "women can produce images of their own."[20]

Indeed, Luckyj's research opens the door for a rigorous socio-political investigation of McNicoll's paintings. Yet, perplexingly, Luckyj did not present a conclusion of McNicoll's work which concedes feminist meaning.[21] Instead, McNicoll's paintings are viewed throughout the catalogue as anachronistically celebrating the confining definitions of late-Victorian and Edwardian femininity via impressionism.

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[20] Luckyj, 75.

[21] On a research trip to Ottawa in November 2001, I was to meet with Natalie Luckyj (1945 – 2002) to discuss her work on Helen McNicoll. However, our appointment was cancelled on account of her sudden

This position is also taken by Matthew Teitelbaum. Consider the following assessment of McNicoll's work provided by Teitelbaum in the exhibition catalogue's preface:

> [McNicoll's] subject matter . . . celebrated the carefree world of leisure. . . . Hers was a world of relative innocence . . . It is noteworthy that McNicoll's career came to an end with her early death, just a handful of years after Matisse's great breakthrough into Fauvism and Braque's leap into the . . . Cubist movement, because it makes all the more apparent McNicoll's heartfelt and deeply experienced nostalgia for an art that communicated values of an earlier time.[22]

The adjectives used by Teitelbaum to describe McNicoll's work are gendered and serve to situate her paintings in the realm of the sentimental and emotive rather than intellectual – a stereotypical approach to the interpretation of women's art. Teitelbaum's assertion that McNicoll's lived experience was one of 'innocence' contradicts the reality and the historical evidence that her position as an independent woman was viewed by many of her contemporaries as a corruption of femininity. During McNicoll's lifetime, professional women were viewed, at best, as unconventional and, at worst, as a menace to the established social order.[23] McNicoll proved her familiarity with the unfair treatment

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illness. I regret having missed the opportunity to discuss McNicoll's life and practice with this well-respected and admired scholar.

[22] Luckyj, 11.

[23] Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), 21. Women professionals in the early-twentieth century faced much opposition when they entered the careers they had trained for. Faderman provides the example of Dr. Sarah Josephine Baker, a health commissioner for New York city in the early 1900s, who was told to print her name "Dr. S. J. Baker" so the Health Department could "disguise the presence of a woman in a responsible executive post" (21). Early professional women were well aware of the disputatious positions they occupied and which often resulted in self-identity problems. Faderman asserts that many early professional women felt themselves forced to dress and behave in a way that was characterized as masculine. As Dr. Baker described, she wore man-tailored suits, stiff collars, and ties because "I badly needed protective coloring . . .[so that] when a masculine colleague of mine looked around the office in a

women artists often received by their male colleagues in a letter she wrote to her father recounting her attendance at an RBA meeting in which a woman artist was forced to resign merely for speaking her mind:

> Last Saturday was a most stormy meeting, but only from one member, a Miss Ethel Wright. She and Dolly and I were the only women there. But this one protested the way she had been hung – they, the hangers, were "ratters" and the hanging was a disgrace. You never saw so many angry and helpless looking men. One man who tried hard to keep her out of the society moved that if she did not apologize she should resign. And she did resign, then and there. It was too bad because . . . her work was interesting and it helped to brighten the show.[24]

Teitelbaum's consideration of McNicoll's subject matter as simply an extension of traditional femininity, informed only by nostalgia and her experiences of a 'carefree world of leisure', denies her agency and contradicts the transgressive position she occupied as a professional woman in the early-twentieth century. His text merely reiterates the established modernist narrative.[25] McNicoll's 'heartfelt' subject matter is placed in opposition to Matisse and Braque's modernist 'breakthroughs' and 'leaps' in style and form and is thus characterized as inconsequential to the development of art's history. Paradoxically, McNicoll's artistic capabilities are at once venerated and disparaged.

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rather critical state of mind, no feminine furbelows would catch his eye and give him an excuse to become irritated by the presence of a woman where, according to him, a woman had no right to be. . . . I wore a costume – almost a uniform – because the last thing I wanted was to be conspicuously feminine when working with men" (21).

[24] Helen McNicoll, London, England, to David McNicoll, Montreal, Canada, 28 March 1913, Artists' Files, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

[25] That the contributions of women artists have been misrecognized and characterized as less significant than their male counterparts in modernist interpretations of art history has been well established by several feminist theorists. See Bridget Elliott and Joanne Wallace, eds., Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (im)positionings (London: Routledge, 1994), and Katy Deepwell, ed., Women Artists and Modernism, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

Cultural theorist Kass Banning has expressed similar concerns with the critical treatment to which Canadian women artists are typically subjected in her review of the catalogue for the Joyce Wieland retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1987. Her critical insights demonstrate the methodological difficulties of assessing women's art practices. Banning questions the gendered interpretation of Wieland's oeuvre in the catalogue, even though its authors focused on her status as a feminist pioneer, and argues that the authors failed to position Wieland's work, which frequently addresses the socio-political positionings of Canadian women, within the critical feminist discourse of the 1980s.[26] Helen McNicoll's practice is subjected to the same methodological problem, resulting in a misrecognition of her works importance which is accepted and perpetuated by contemporary audiences who consider the interpretation of a prestigious cultural institution like the Art Gallery of Ontario to be legitimate and authoritative. The following excerpt taken from a review of the 1999 show evidences the limited understanding of McNicoll's work which the AGO exhibition fostered:

> Although McNicoll was painting at a time when women's roles were in dramatic transition, these challenges are not present in her work. Instead, she transcends her social backdrop and the fact that women artists were often overshadowed by their male counterparts.[27]

McNicoll did not transcend her social backdrop. Conversely, it significantly influenced her lived experience and informed her work, as it did so many other women artists living in the early-twentieth century.

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[26] Kass Banning, "The Mummification of Mommy: Joyce Wieland as the AGO's First Living Other," Sightlines: Reading Contemporary Canadian Art, eds. Jessica Bradley and Lesley Johnstone (Artextes editions, 1994), 153-167.

[27] Kathy Lipic, "Helen McNicoll: Sunshine in the Shadows," www.law.utoronto.ca/ultravires/nov99/diversions, November 1999.

Grieselda Pollock has argued that to be a woman artist during the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras "was to be both on the margins of culture and at its center."[28] This was a period in which the definition of femininity became rigidly defined and was then challenged and destabilized by feminist activity. Women were metaphorically associated with Nature, Domesticity, Maternity, and Spirituality. By the late-nineteenth century, the notions of ideal femininity were threatened by the emerging women's movement, which sought to displace the definitions of womanhood as dependent and inert. Feminists attempted to reclaim the symbol Woman and redefine femininity on the basis of social, political, and intellectual equality. As Pollock argues:

> This was a century during which Woman's Nature, Duty and Destiny were proclaimed to lie absolutely in the private sphere of Home and Hearth; these were the designated "spaces of femininity." Woman – a repetitiously painted fantasy appearing in various, always extreme guises – was consecrated to the obligations of Motherhood and Self-Sacrifice. Woman was the anithesis of intellect and agency. Yet in the face of modernity, its radical changes and instabilities, Woman became what in literary theory would be called a trope, that is, a metaphorical figure, allegorizing the city and modern life itself. Through the various fantasies of La Femme and La Fille – wife and mother at home or women in the streets – the ideals and anxieties of modern life found a rhetoric. We will miss the vital aspects of nineteenth-century culture and society . . . if we do not recognize the paradoxical centrality of femininity to the theme of modernity which so preoccupied its intelligentsia.[29]

Women artists occupied a socially-transgressive position during this period. They were claiming the previously male-dominated spaces of culture. They embodied the ideals of the New Woman – intelligent, autonomous, active. According to Cherry, how a woman artist at the turn of twentieth century "conducted her career, which clients she cultivated, how she dressed and comported herself, the choices she made in the modest practices of daily life were all obliquely or directly informed by political identifications."[30] To some people, professional women represented change and progress, to others they denoted social denigration. To assume that Helen McNicoll could or would want to transcend this context, that no shard of it influenced her artistic production, erases her active participation and perpetuates a method of social and cultural analysis that removes women from history.

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[28] Grieselda Pollock, Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 121.
[29] Pollock, 121-122.

McNicoll forged and managed an artistic career during an historical moment when the roles, attainments, and expectations of women artists were intensely debated in ways that touched upon one of the most contentious political movements of the twentieth century – the campaign for women's suffrage. When McNicoll left Canada for England in 1902, she departed a country in the midst of a complicated debate regarding the social and political position of women. The beginning of a new century inspired numerous Canadians to assess the country's past, present, and future and the 'woman question' was on the lips of many. In the mid-nineteenth century, a women's movement had emerged in Canada. It was the culmination of a series of reform campaigns in which women of diverse backgrounds exercised considerable political finesse and negotiating skills to bring together labour, farm, women's, and Christian reform groups in support of their various causes.[31] Women's public presence was stronger than it had ever been, with a variety of women's reform organizations thriving in urban and rural communities throughout the country. A rich mosaic of women's artistic and cultural groups added to the strength of their growing public presence.[32] By the turn of the century, Canadian women had secured many rights, including access to higher education and the right to practice law and medicine. After half a century of the collective social and political endeavors that secured these advancements, women were especially poised to reflect on their progress. They had succeeded in gaining expanded opportunities in many areas, but they still had not won the right to vote in provincial and federal elections. The Canadian suffragist Henrietta Muir Edwards wrote in 1901:

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[30] Cherry, "Women Artists and the Politics of Feminism, 1850-1900," 51.
[31] Alison Prentice, Canadian Women: A History (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 89.
[32] Ibid.

> . . . At the present time almost every Canadian woman who is at all interested in questions of the day dealing with education, philanthropy, or social life is in favor of . . . woman franchise. . . . The woman is queen in her home and reigns there, but unfortunately the laws she makes reach no further than her domain. If her laws, written or unwritten, are to be enforced outside, she must come into the political world as well – and she has come.[33]

When McNicoll arrived in England, she entered a social and political milieu on the brink of experiencing the most volatile period of the British women's suffrage movement. British women had also entered the world of politics and by the turn of the twentieth century, after fighting for the vote for over forty years, they began to make their demands for social and political equality heard with a vengeance.[34] Like its Canadian counterpart, the British suffrage movement centered on the definition of femininity. Anti-suffragists argued against women's political independence on the basis of traditional ideologies of femininity as irrational and dependant, while suffragists tried to contest this view by re-presenting and re-defining the symbol Woman as equally capable in all spheres of human endeavor. As Lisa Tickner argues:

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[33] Women of Canada, Their Life and Work (National Council of Women of Canada, 1901), 51. As Edwards's words imply, the movement for women's suffrage in Canada was largely an attempt to extend women's domestic duties to the public sphere. Although initiated by feminists who advocated women's equality in all social spheres, the movement's aims and organization eventually came under the control of social reformers who believed in women's special claims to moral virtue. They believed that women's superior morality would result in the eradication of social ills caused by alcohol, immigration, urbanization, and poverty if only they could exercise their political voice. The egalitarian feminists who started the movement were overshadowed by those who espoused the ideology of maternal feminism. In regards to politics, maternal feminists only wanted to extend women's 'nurturing' qualities to the public sphere – to introduce 'public housekeeping'.

[34] Lisa Tickner, "Suffrage Campaigns: The Political Imagery of the British Women's Suffrage Movement," The Edwardian Era, eds. Deborah Cherry and Jane Beckett (London: Phaidon Press and Barbican Art Gallery, 1987), 100. Two organizations dominated the suffrage campaign between 1900 and 1914. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, consolidated from sixteen constituent societies under the presidency of Millicent Fawcett in 1877, was the largest. The NUWSS was a non-militant group that favored lobbying and peaceful negotiations with the British government as its primary strategy for winning enfranchisement. The Women's Social and Political Union, founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, advocated more aggressive tactics. The WSPU was soon the largest of the individual suffrage societies and

> In the context of this movement many questions have been raised about the definition of femininity and the social experience of woman, about the forms of domination that place women in specific ways, and the role of cultural practices in perpetuating the relations of power to which we are subject. . . . The strategies to which [the suffragists] gave rise required the revision or displacement of dominant representations of femininity in social circulation.[35]

Representing a group of educated women who were managing careers in a male-dominated public sphere, women artists who supported the suffrage campaign were important to the movement's identity. Suffragists were interested in women artists because they had attributes of creativity, professional competence, and autonomy – characteristics which were still unconventional for women at the turn of the twentieth century. For many women during this period, the decision to pursue a career as an artist was motivated or paralleled by campaigning for a wide range of women's issues.[36] Towards the end of the nineteenth century, numerous women artists joined the suffrage campaign in Britain. They were by no means a homogenous group. These women came

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the principal militant group. Its formation transformed the British suffrage campaign. The WSPU was central to the re-activation of the suffrage campaign and their militant activities ensured that the media devoted substantial attention to the 'Suffragettes'– the name given to the suffragists by the Daily Mail in 1906 and later adopted by WSPU members. Their efforts to attract attention paid off, but at the expense of being subjected to public humiliation and even physical abuse. The extensive media coverage and public debate garnered by the suffragists was a response to the serious threat they posed to traditional norms regarding Victorian and Edwardian femininity, family values, and even progress.

[35] Lisa Tickner, The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 4.

[36] Cherry, "Women Artists and the Politics of Feminism, 1850-1900," 49.

from a variety of social backgrounds, holding different political views and harnessing their support to both the constitutional and militant suffrage groups. Feminism in the early-twentieth century was a term that included a diversity of interventions in discourse and culture. It encompassed multiple perspectives, including egalitarian feminism which focused on equal rights, social purity feminism based on the admonishment of masculine sexuality and vice, and socialist feminism directed to changing the inequalities of class and economic relations.[37]

Women artists were generally not among the prominent leaders of the British suffrage campaign, with the exception of Sylvia Pankhurst who was the daughter of the WSPU founder Emmeline Pankhurst, but they participated by holding drawing room and studio meetings, joining and funding suffrage societies, and signing petitions.[38] Their skill in manipulating visual language was an essential tool in the suffragists' attempt to represent women as deserving of political independence, and in countering the derogatory images of the suffragists being perpetuated by their opponents. Two organized artistic groups dedicated to supporting the suffrage campaign emerged, the majority of whose members were women. The Artist's Suffrage League, formed in 1907, and the Artist's Atelier, formed in 1909, produced posters, postcards and banners used for suffrage propaganda, public demonstrations and meetings.[39] Helen McNicoll was not a member of either group, nor was Dorothea Sharp, but the two had connections to these organizations through their involvement with the Society of Women Artists.

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[37] Cherry, Beyond the Frame, 3.
[38] Ibid., 56.
[39] Tickner, The Spectacle of Women, 16-27.

Suffragist meaning is subtly ingrained in The Chintz Sofa. However, because its content appears to bear no overt socio-political references, extracting such meaning has posed a significant challenge to late-twentieth century audiences. The interpretation of McNicoll's work is impeded by the methodological problem that continues to undermined the importance of women's artistic contributions. Like the work of Joyce Wieland - which Banning argues was misunderstood by many critics for most of her career because, without an indigenous Canadian critical context or vocabulary of feminist art, it was impossible to develop a comprehensive interpretation of her work - McNicoll's oeuvre has been misunderstood. The dynamic socio-political context of which she was a part has been submerged, diminishing her agency and removing her, and the content of her work, from history.

The critical interventions of early-twentieth century feminists in the fields of politics, law, the professions, and culture were nearly entirely forgotten by writers of social and political history for most of the twentieth century. The women's suffrage campaign was for many years marginal to the interests of political historians, both in Canada and Britain, and the suffragists' use of posters, postcards, and large scale public spectacle "fell victim to a common myopia with regard to the visual past."[40] The visual imagery of the campaign was considered too artistic by political historians and too political for the history of art. Therefore, it was omitted from the two contexts in which it might have found a place: on the one hand, the history of political posters and propaganda, and on the other, the developing history of women's work as artists and designers.[41] Nevertheless, visual imagery was a key tactic employed by suffragists in the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras, and the women artists who supported the campaign through their work brought feminist politics into the realm of the fine arts. "From this moment on," asserts Cherry, "women's art and feminism were inextricably intertwined: speech on the one invariably incited discourse on the other. . . .When artists joined the women's movement, the politics of feminism connected to the practice of art."[42] Indeed, the activities of the suffrage campaign and the debate centering on women's roles and the definition of femininity which it induced pervaded every level of Edwardian society. Any person in Canada or England who read a newspaper during this period would have been well aware of suffrage activity and the visual iconography of the campaign. Tickner's contextualization underlines this point:

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[40] Ibid., ix.

> Representations of the feminine [between 1904 and 1915], together with the appropriate moral, social, and political function of women, were constantly produced in such contemporary institutions and discourses as those of education, law, medicine, journalism, fine art, and popular illustration.[43]

The British suffragists invaded public spaces with their demands for social and political equality by staging public demonstrations, marches, and processions. British suffragists published a large number of propaganda postcards. The last phase of the suffrage campaign corresponded with the 'golden age' of the picture postcard, specifically with the intense period of post-card production and circulation between 1904 and 1910.[44] Middle-class enthusiasts avidly collected postcards, subscribed to postcard journals, and formed postcard clubs. Any subject was a possible theme for postcards "including the views, sporting picture, theatrical and music hall personalities.... new cars, aeroplanes and the two penny tube, the clothes and customs of other nations and...the personalities and activities of the suffrage campaign."[45] McNicoll's contemporary audience was immersed in the issues and images of the women's movement, both in text and visual form. To the Edwardian spectator, the imagery of The Chintz Sofa would have undoubtedly prompted associations with the suffrage campaign. The women's movement pervaded the visual culture of the early-twentieth century and therefore cannot be ignored in the consideration of McNicoll's work and the subject matter she chose to represent.

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Cherry, Beyond the Frame, 9.
[43] Tickner, The Spectacle of Women, 152.
[44] Ibid., 50.

In the context of modern visuality, McNicoll's audience would have been conscious of the variety of meanings visual imagery could sustain and would have been able to extract the feminist meaning ingrained in The Chintz Sofa. The second half of the nineteenth century was marked by the development of an increasingly visual culture in which new technologies such as photography resulted in a proliferation of visual materials targeted to diverse audiences. Posters, fine art engravings, pictorial editions of novels and poetry, illustrated papers and comic magazines were all widely distributed. In busy and crowded urban centers such as London, visual materials were ascribed a persuasive authority. The elite forms of fine art were shaped by and understood within a visual culture in which art and politics collided. Visual representations were increasingly politicized. As Cherry argues:

> In this public arena of mass visual representations, the fine arts of painting and sculpture as much as comic drawings became a battleground for

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[45] Ibid., 51.

> intense debates about the role of women in contemporary society. Few gallery goers, art collectors, newspaper readers or casual observers would have been unaware of a major event which provoked contention as much in the columns of The Art Journal as on the pages of Punch. Feminism provided frames for viewing and interpreting, sometimes stated, at other times not. And visual culture brought feminism into the frame: illustrated magazines gave local activists visibility. Artists who took up the challenge of imaging women as subjects who could claim political rights and visual representation were not unmindful of illustrations in the national press.[46]

I believe that several sections of McNicoll's audience, which included other artists and Canadian and British patrons who visited exhibitions at the AAM, the OSA, the RCA, and the RBA, would have been capable of interpreting The Chintz Sofa as other than an image of domestic femininity.

Women artists, and women involved in the Canadian and British suffrage movements, would have been particularly able to read The Chintz Sofa through a feminist perspective. Given that McNicoll exhibited with the Society of Women Artists in London and was awarded the Women's Art Society Prize in Canada in 1914, it is clear that certain sections of her audience were sensitive to women's issues.[47] This was a period in which women were constantly producing imagery that addressed feminist concerns. They were grappling with methods of self-representation in an attempt to define their new roles and new identities.[48] Women were endeavoring to refashion the symbol Woman for their own use and their own self-definition.[49] These women faced many questions regarding how they could begin to produce meanings of their own when forced to work with a tradition of visual conventions created by men for men. One of the ways in which women artists articulated perceptions of their transforming social identities was through representations of the female figure. Gualtieri offers the following assertion in support of this view:

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[46] Cherry, Beyond the Frame, 2.

[47] Maria Tippett, By A Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1992), 40. The Women's Art Society of Montreal was established in 1890 as an alternative to the major art institutions in which women were excluded from holding positions of authority. The society gave women a space in which they could gather to paint, sculpt, exhibit and discuss art. The society also awarded scholarships for women artists to study in Europe.

[48] Elsa Honig Fine, Women and Art: A History of Women Painters and Sculptors from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century (Allanheld and Schram/Prior, 1978), 124-125. Fine maintains that the aspect of self-discovery and analysis, much like the writing of a personal diary, can be considered the basis of the art of women such as Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, and Gwen John whose work is outstanding for its preoccupation with the portrayal of the single female image. Regarding Morisot, Fine argues that "as a girl, wife, or mother her sketches and paintings follow her own existence closely. I am tempted to say that to see her work all together reminds one of a woman's diary in colour and line" (125).

> . . . there is a correlation between the increased focus on women and their emergence in society – precipitated by the demand for women's rights – and the increasing predominance of the female image among female painters [in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries]. By focussing on the female image, women artists were able to explore their own female-reality and to reconcile their individuality with an understanding of their commonality with other women.[50]

When depicted by a woman artist, the female image took on new meanings. Its associations with the visual conventions of beauty, domesticity and inactivity became destabilized. Through the representation of the female image, women were constructing the new self-identities needed to accompany the radical social transformations which they were inducing.

Because women worked with an androcentric visual vocabulary, feminist interventions in the representation of the female figure were, and remain, difficult to extract. Male artists had been manipulating the female form and burdening it with their own meanings (nature, liberty, art, beauty, temptation, innocence) for centuries. Women artists did not have a tradition of representing themselves. Their images of women, therefore, were confined within a tradition of signification intended for the masculine viewpoint. Nevertheless, they were able to intervene in this language and subtly infuse the androcentric conventions of female imagery with their own meanings. Feminist literary theorists Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's arguments regarding how nineteenth-century women writers worked with male-devised genres is applicable to the women painters who concentrated on female subject matter in the early-twentieth century. Gubar and Gilbert assert that when the great works of nineteenth century women poets and novelists are examined, it becomes apparent that an extraordinary number of literary women were able to grow beyond the mimicry of male-established conventions.[51] From Austen to Dickinson, these writers dealt with women's experiences from a specifically female perspective. But this feminine aspect of their writing has been generally ignored by critics because the most successful of these writers often seem to have channeled such concerns into secret or obscure levels. They created meanings submerged within or behind the more accessible, 'public' content of their works, so that their literature could be read and appreciated even when its feminist concerns were not recognized. The one plot that seems to be concealed in most nineteenth-century literature by women, argue Gilbert and Gubar, is an allegory of the woman writer's quest for self-definition. This quality of self-absorption and inward search is paralleled in The Chintz Sofa.

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[49] Gualtieri, 99. A genre of subjects depicting women and their activities produced by women artists became prominent in the late-Victorian period and through to the 1920s, epitomized visually in the work of Canadian, American, and European painters including: Sidney Strickland Tully, Marion Long, Laura Muntz Lyall, Florence Carlyle, Helen McNicoll, Cecelia Beaux, Helen Turner, Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morisot, and Paula Mondersohn Becker. Gualtieri argues that these women chose to portray female portraits and figure studies of mothers and children not only because it was familiar and accessible, but because "more than any other subject, painting the female figure was the best conduit through which they could explore their innermost thoughts and emotions" (99). Gualtieri asserts that for these women painters, who had to struggle against a male-dominated society and art establishment, painting women was regarded as the visual equivalent to writing, be it in the form of a journal or a novel.

[50] Gualtieri, 102-103.

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[51] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 72.

Symbols of women's socio-political history are also ingrained in this painting's imagery. Needlework, specifically embroidery, was employed by the British suffragists as a subversive political tool. Because needlework is conflated with stereotypes of womanliness, it has proved difficult for late-twentieth century critics to interpret this image as anything other than an aesthetic portrayal of femininity. Its socio-political content has collapsed into stereotypes of femininity based on historical ignorance. The physical position assumed when embroidering or sewing visually reinforces the stereotype of feminine submissiveness and servitude: eyes lowered, head bent, shoulders hunched. When these encompassing connotations are displaced, however, the embroiderer's silence and concentration also suggests independent thought. Viewed through the perspective of feminist activity and the iconography of the women's suffrage movement in Britain between 1900 and 1915, the image of Dorothea Sharp embroidering takes on a more complex meaning – it becomes a political intervention. In order to extract this meaning, the deeply-imbued and ahistorical stereotypes of traditional femininity which needlework evokes must be rejected.

Images of girls and women embroidering and sewing are common themes in McNicoll's work, which has significantly contributed to the misinterpretation of her subject matter as an extension of traditional feminine activity devoid of significant content. Roszika Parker's assertion regarding the history of embroidery and the social construction of femininity reinforces this premise:

> Traditionally, women have called embroidery 'work.' Although to some extent an appropriate term, it tends to confirm the stereotypical notion that patience and perseverance go into embroidery – but little else. Moreover, the term was engendered by an ideology of femininity as service and

> selflessness and the insistence that women work for others, not for themselves. . . . That embroiderers do transform materials to produce sense – whole ranges of meanings – is invariably entirely overlooked. Instead embroidery and a stereotype of femininity have become collapsed into one another, characterised as mindless, decorative and delicate; like the icing on the cake, good to look at, adding taste and status, but devoid of significant content.[52]

McNicoll's production of feminist meaning in this painting, and our ability to grasp this meaning, is complicated by the feminine stereotypes which needlework evokes. The socio-political content of the image's iconography is ignored in favour of the stereotypes which needlework carries for today's audiences. McNicoll's representation of embroidery has been reduced to a *natural* inclination to celebrate traditional femininity.

The notions of femininity which dominated perceptions of needlework in the early-twentieth century were the result of ideologies based on male fantasy and a patriarchal desire to command the position of women through a controlled definition of femininity. Through masculine manipulation, needlework became both a symbol and instrument of female subservience. Women were denied the right to define their own perceptions of needlework as a positive symbol of their history and culture. As Parker explains, "the stereotype of embroidery as a vain and frivolous occupation, like the stereotype of the silent, seductive needlewoman, controls and undermines the power and pleasure women have found in embroidery, representing it to us negatively."[53] However, we cannot assume that women universally adhered to the constrictive prescription of femininity which needlework embodied, or that by representing needlework in their art they accepted the confining definition of femininity that it evokes. Some nineteenth-century feminists distanced themselves from embroidery because of its negative feminine associations, thus "asserting [their] seriousness and disdain for feminine frivolity."[54] For tactical reasons, argues Parker, women who were critical of embroidery may have praised it while others determined to raise their status attempted to reclaim the tradition of embroidery by demanding that its true worth as a symbol of women's culture be recognized.[55]

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[52] Roszika Parker, The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine (New York: Routledge, 1989), 6.
[53] Ibid., 14.

In addition to stereotypical notions of womanliness, needlework embodies a history of women's intellectual, artistic and socio-political history. The twentieth century witnessed several instances in which needlework became part of a move to transform the role of art in society and women within society. Embroidery was used as a political tactic by suffragists in Britain, by Russian revolutionaries, and in the feminist movement of the 1970s. Contemporary interpretations of needlework must acknowledge the socio-political function it has served rather than simply accepting it as having a blanket meaning of essential femininity.

British suffragists manipulated certain ideologies associated with embroidery to their advantage. For example, the association of women with needlework had its benefits in the production of embroidered banners that dignified womanly skills while making unwomanly demands. Suffragists used embroidery to evoke femininity as a source of strength rather than as evidence of women's weakness. Through their utilization of embroidered banners, suffragists exploited an ancient, honoured, and particularly female service to their own ends. McNicoll employs the same strategy in The Chintz Sofa, depicting Dorothea Sharp as a suffrage activist.

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[54] Ibid., 6.
[55] Ibid.

Embroidered banners were a crucial tool of visual propaganda in the British movement for women's suffrage. Suffrage demonstrations and processions were heavily dependant on "the long array of pennons, banners, trophies, garlands and badges, most resplendent in their gorgeous execution and workmanship."[56] From 1907 to 1914, suffragists organized several demonstrations in which thousands of women from a variety of backgrounds and occupations marched through the streets of London and the British countryside in support of the 'Cause.'[57] The large number of participants proved that women from every segment of society wanted the vote (Figure 18). Thousands of spectators witnessed these processions, and those not in attendance could receive a detailed account of them in the next day's papers.

Women involved with the Artists Suffrage League and the Suffrage Atelier created embroidered banners illustrating the diversity of women's achievements and the various groups who supported female enfranchisement. The images and inscriptions embroidered on suffrage banners celebrated women's history, and the collective workmanship that went into their production spoke to a shared identity that was tinged with political significance (Figures 21 & 22). Suffragists were able to subvert the traditional associations of needlework for their particular audiences, while reclaiming it as a positive testament to women's artistic and domestic production. By doing so, they added a layer of meaning to needlework that speaks to women's socio-political struggle for independence. In Lisa Tickner's words:

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[56] Tickner, The Spectacle of Women, 60.

[57] Ibid., 73-178. The largest and most publicized processions of the British suffrage campaign include The Mud March of 1907, The NUWSS Demonstration of 1908, the WSPU's Woman's Sunday of 1908, The

> In so far as [suffrage banners] made reference to the past it was as part of a political strategy for the present; and in so far as they mobilised women's traditional needlework skills – so much a part of the contemporary feminine stereotype as to be almost a secondary sexual characteristic – it was to challenge the terms of that femininity in a collective political enterprise.[58]

McNicoll's use of embroidery in The Chintz Sofa references women's intellectual and creative history, just as suffrage banners did. To McNicoll's contemporary audience, which was immersed in a socio-political and visual context dominated by the imagery of the suffrage campaign, this painting would have conjured associations to the women's movement. McNicoll's choice to portray Dorothea Sharp in a white dress further reinforces the connection between this representation and the imagery of the suffrage campaign. The political tactics employed by British suffragists, particularly public demonstrations and processions, exposed these women to the public gaze in a direct and overt way. The suffragists soon became aware that their physical bodies were being read as symbols of the women's movement. The way a suffragist was composed, her body language, and her clothing were all subject to interpretations by the public. In this context a suffragist's style of dress could be used as another form of visual imagery for the communication of feminist ideologies and demands.[59]

Fashion became a political tactic employed by the suffragists to project the positive image of femininity needed to foster public support of women's enfranchisement. Dress was used to counter anti-suffrage arguments which claimed that women who wanted the vote were unnatural, manly viragos. White dresses became the uniform adopted by suffragists for public appearances, symbolizing their solidarity and feminine 'purity'.

Pageant of Women's Trades and Professions of 1909, The Women's Coronation Procession of 1911, Emily Wilding Davison's Funeral in 1913, and The National Union Women's Pilgrimage of 1913.

[58] Ibid., 60.

[59] Ibid., 63.

McNicoll's depiction of Sharp attired in such a dress is no coincidence. She, and her audience, would have been well-aware of the political implications manifested by a representation of Sharp embroidering in a white dress.

By bringing feminism and the women's movement 'into the frame', the analysis of The Chintz Sofa as an image of passive femininity cannot be sustained. McNicoll was an active participant in her socio-political context, and her experiences and perceptions of a society in which women like herself occupied a challenging position informs this work. It is an image that evidences the subtle ways in which women were able to intervene in and transform male-established conventions to produce meanings of their own. When stereotypical associations of women's art practice are rejected, the iconography of this work clearly concedes feminist meaning. McNicoll's deliberate choice to depict Dorothea Sharp as an Edwardian suffragist in a setting which was the site of their artistic and intellectual production is a testament to her dynamic lived experience and an important record of women's culture.

Conclusion

Historical evidence positions Helen McNicoll amongst the women who transgressed their traditional social roles and re-defined femininity as independent, active and capable in all spheres of human endeavor during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. McNicoll's lived experience as a woman actively involved in her historical moment and recognized as an important contributor to the development of Canadian culture by her contemporaries demands that her work be interpreted as informed by significant creative, intellectual, and historical concerns. This investigation of McNicoll's images of women has demonstrated that when stereotypical analyses of women's art are displaced, these paintings can be viewed as addressing feminist issues and should be considered important records of women's cultural history. The disturbing conclusion of this investigation is that the work of Canadian historical, and contemporary, women artists continues to be subjected to gendered interpretations, despite the thirty-year effort of feminist cultural theorists such as Griselda Pollock, Roszika Parker, Deborah Cherry, and Lisa Tickner to correct this disciplinary affliction by introducing alternative frameworks that recognize women as creative agents.

It is not enough that historical women artists like Helen McNicoll are re-discovered and placed within the existing art historical canon. Revisionist art historical practices do not address the underlining issues that have resulted in women's marginalization, and often complete erasure, from our historical and cultural records. Art historian Joyce Zemans argues that, in a hasty attempt to emend this methodological error by inserting women into current art historical accounts, "the specific factors affecting women's work and its varying differences from men's are avoided and overlooked," by many Canadian critics and theorists.[1] Such was the case regarding Helen McNicoll. In the AGO's 1999 exhibition Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist, which was devoted to a presumably progressive reexamination of her career, the significance of McNicoll's work was reduced to stereotypically feminine concerns for sentimentality and nostalgia. The foreword to the exhibition's catalogue states, "the brilliant images of an exceptional young woman still move us with their delicate sense of colour and the fragile beauty of her silent world."[2] Despite Natalie Luckyj's arguments that McNicoll's work be interpreted as informed by her socio-political context, her oeuvre was ultimately presented as removed from history and limited to 'delicate' and 'fragile' extensions of feminine motifs devoid of significant content. Such an analysis exemplifies the problematic approach to the understanding and recording of the work of Canadian women artists, and women artists in general, which continues to dominate art historical investigations.

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[1] Joyce Zemans. "A Tale of Three Women: The Visual Arts In Canada / A Current Account/ing," Canadian Art Review 25 (1998): 103.

[2] Natalie Luckyj, Helen McNicoll: A Canadian Impressionist (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1999), 11.

Several reasons can be identified for McNicoll's lengthy lack of recognition by Canadian art historians, and for the consequent mis-recognition of her works' significance, stemming from the masculine and modernist biases which have corrupted established studies of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century visual culture. "The sex of the artist determines the way art is seen," argues Zemans, " and the way art is seen is based on the intersection of two opposing notions: the concept of the artist as male-genius and the stereotype of femininity as inherently incapable of genius."[3] With the advent of modernism and its associations with masculinity, virility, and progression, the work of Canadian women artists like Helen McNicoll whose subject matter was based on the depiction of women's spheres and activities was deemed inconsequential to the development of art and unworthy of recording. Their work was described as homogeneously and essentially feminine, outmoded, and the opposite of the avant-garde 'breakthroughs' of male artists. The idea of the male artist was increasingly conflated with notions of masculinity, and especially male sexuality.[4] Furthermore, after the First World War, the pervasive Canadian drive towards forming a national identity through an art style based on the virility and ruggedness of the landscape, epitomized by the work of the Group of Seven, characterized art and the Canadian artist as masculine. In Zeman's words:

> Despite the fact that the Group of Seven had invited [women artists] to exhibit with them, the prevailing approach to early-twentieth century art tended to exclude from the record individualism and diversity in favour of

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[3] Zemans, 105.

[4] Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early 20th Century Vanguard Painting," ArtForum 12 (December 1973): 30-39.

> a reflection of the national cultural agenda which . . . the Group were instrumental in promoting.[5]

Individualism and diversity are precisely what has not been recognized in the work of early-twentieth century women artists. The similarities in the subject matter and themes of artists like Helen McNicoll, Laura Muntz Lyall, Sophie Pemberton, and Mary Cassatt, which tend to focus on images of women, children and scenes of domesticity, has been traditionally considered symptomatic of the essentially feminine sensibilities which dominate the creative intellect of women artists. What is often overlooked by contemporary critics is the diversity of meanings which inform these images; meanings which relate to the unique and autonomous experiences and perceptions of modernity that motivated these women's artistic creations. Also ignored is the historical evidence that attests to the ability of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century audiences to glean diverse understandings from visual images capable of sustaining various meanings – especially images which centered on women. This was a historical moment in which an increasingly visual culture emerged and, as Deborah Cherry has confirmed, in which art, politics, and feminism collided.[6] Women artists were actively involved in the social and political debates concerning their transforming social roles and identities and, with the proliferation of text and imagery accompanying debates about women's social positions in Britain and North America, certain viewers, especially women, would have been able to discern feminist meaning in otherwise conventional representations of femininity. Cherry's arguments reinforce the legitimacy of this position:

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[5] Zemans, 105.

[6] Deborah Cherry, Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain. 1850-1900 (London: Routledge, 2000), 1-9.

> We can identify the heterogeneity of women's visual representations, their divergent ways of making pictures and producing signs, and the contending meanings which were generated for these works by their contemporary audiences. Various readings would be made by diverse audiences.[7]

Women artists at this time were intervening in traditional modes of representation in order to produce meanings and identities of their own. Because they had to work within a recognizable and acceptable tradition of representation, however, these interventions have, ironically, been viewed as reinforcing the stereotypes of femininity which they attempted to subvert.

This thesis has re-positioned McNicoll in the social, political, and historical contexts which informed her artistic practice. It has also validated her autonomous creative and intellectual accomplishments by interpreting her images of women as more than representations of homogenous, essential extensions of femininity. By viewing The Open Door, Reflection, The Victorian Dress, and The Chintz Sofa through the perspectives of early-twentieth century feminism and contemporary feminist theory, these images become visual records of women's social history. They question the superficial constructions of femininity which governed the lives of women at the time they were painted while speaking to the processes, challenges, and opportunities women faced in the formation of new social identities.

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[7] Deborah Cherry, Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists, (London: Routledge, 1993), 13.

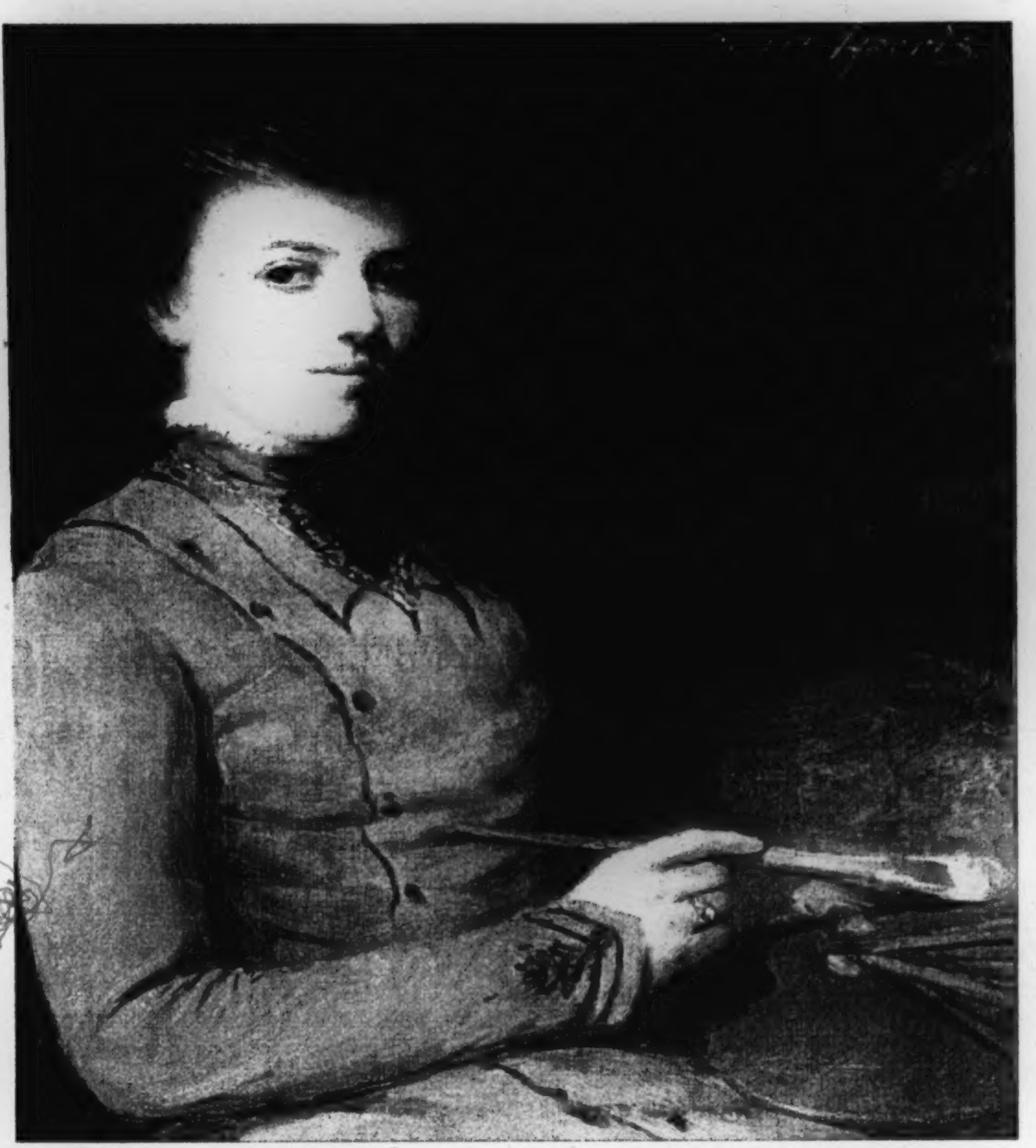


Figure 1: Robert Harris, Portrait of Helen McNicoll, 1910, oil on canvas.

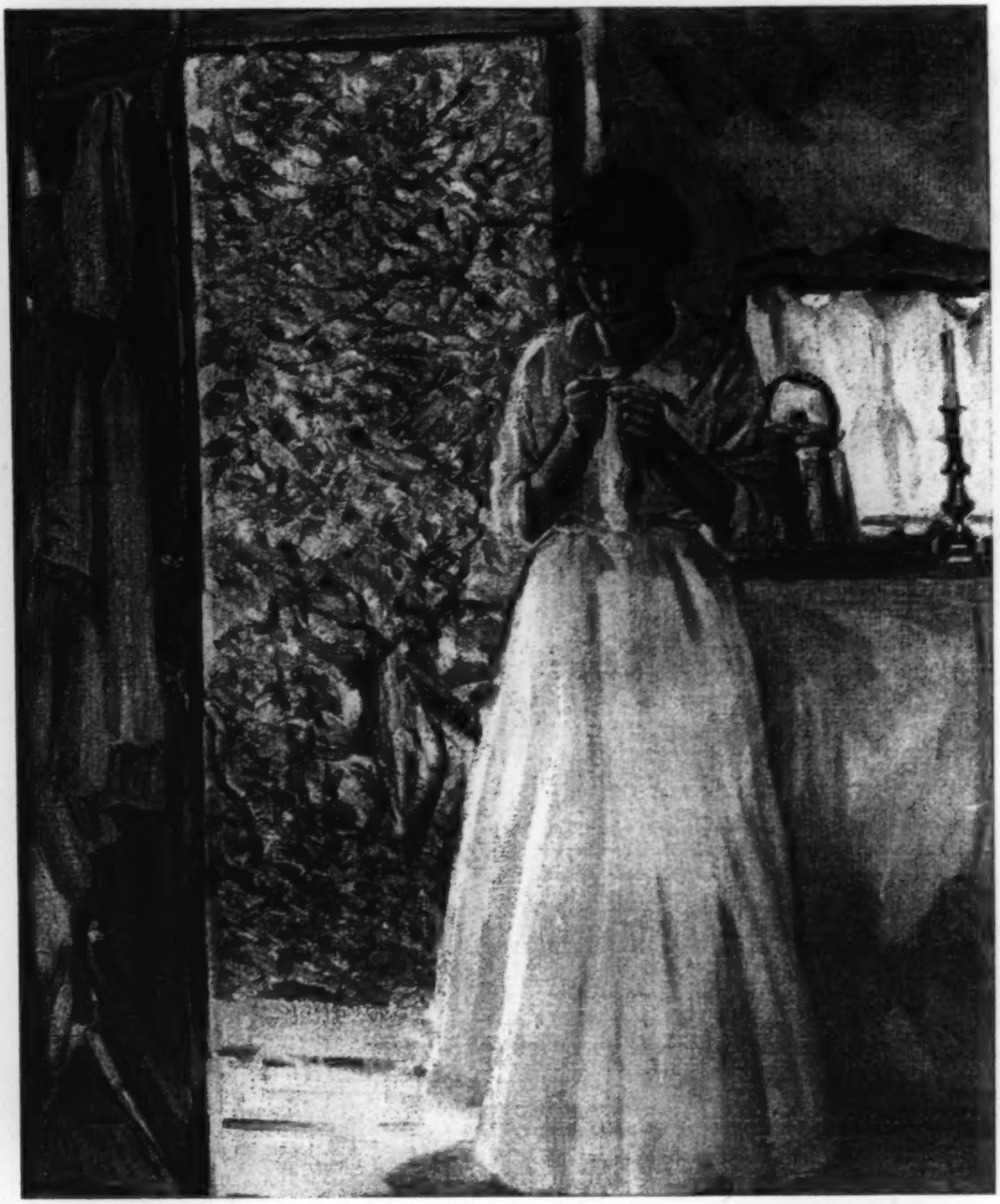


Figure 2: Helen McNicoll, The Open Door, c. 1914, oil on canvas.

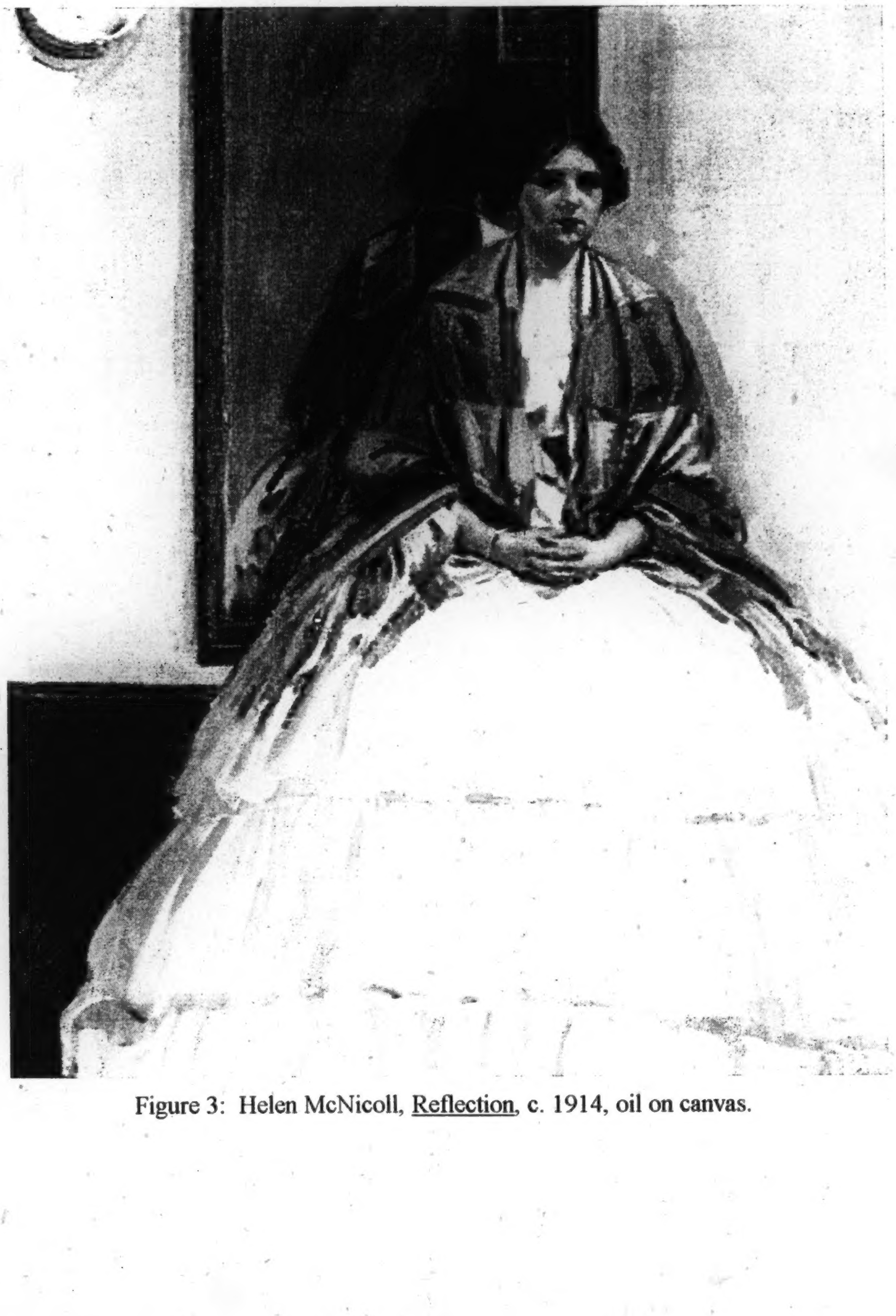


Figure 3: Helen McNicoll, Reflection, c. 1914, oil on canvas.

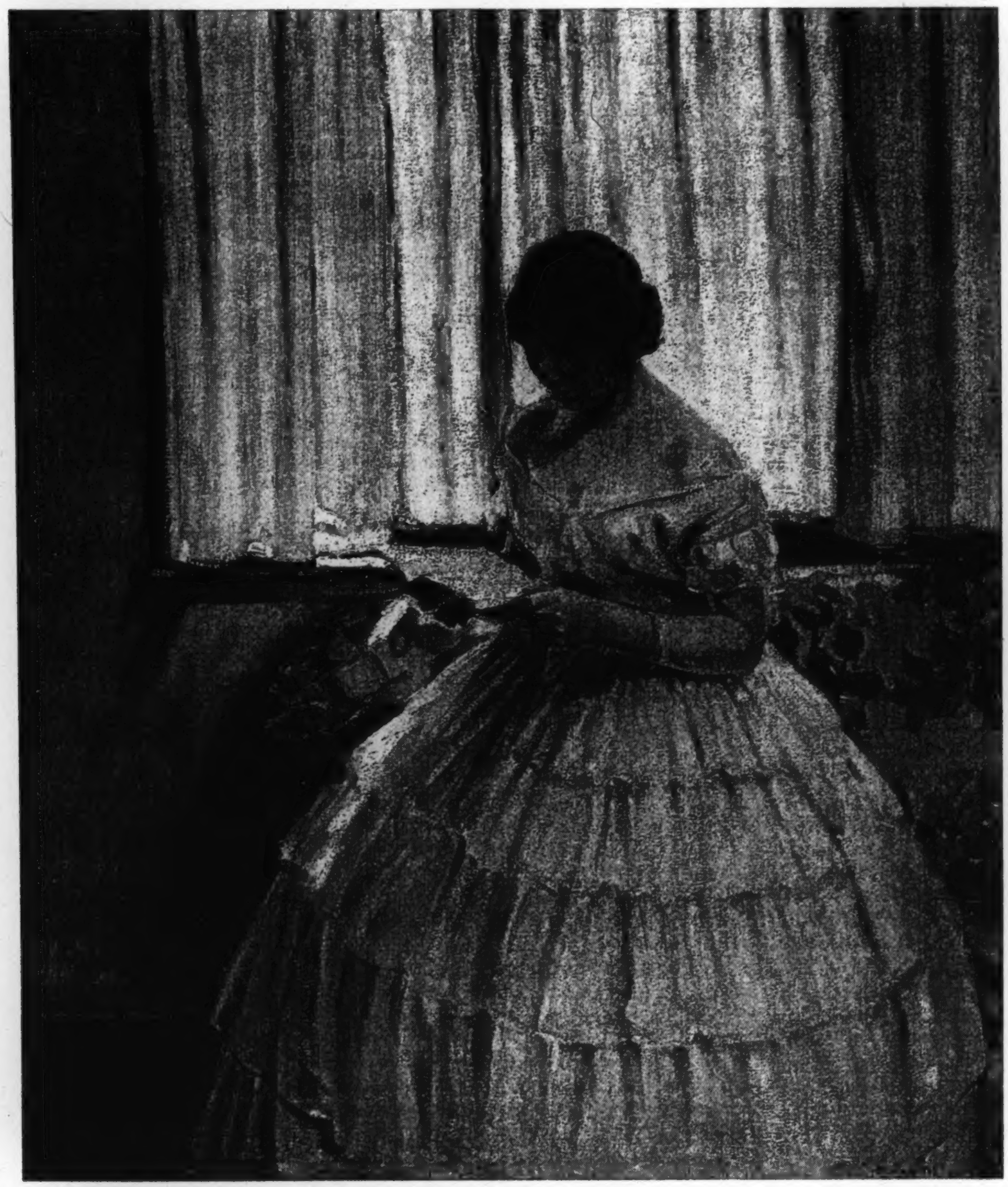


Figure 4: Helen McNicoll, The Victorian Dress, c. 1914, oil on canvas.

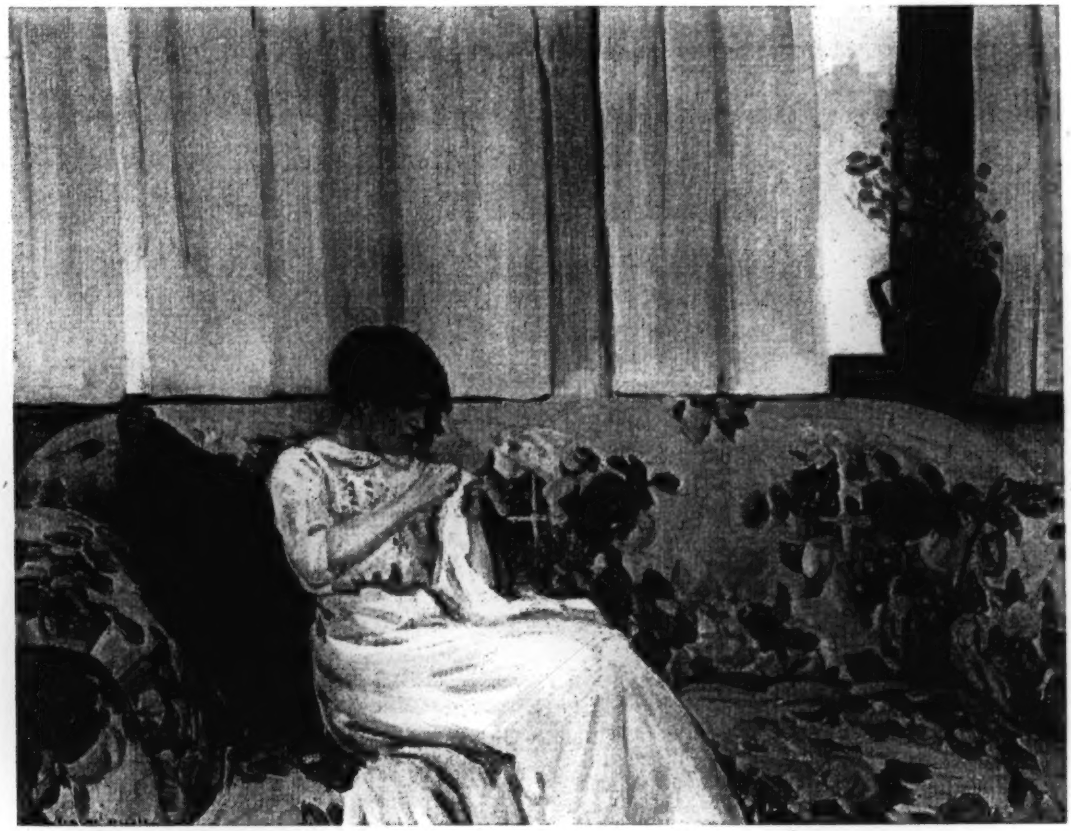
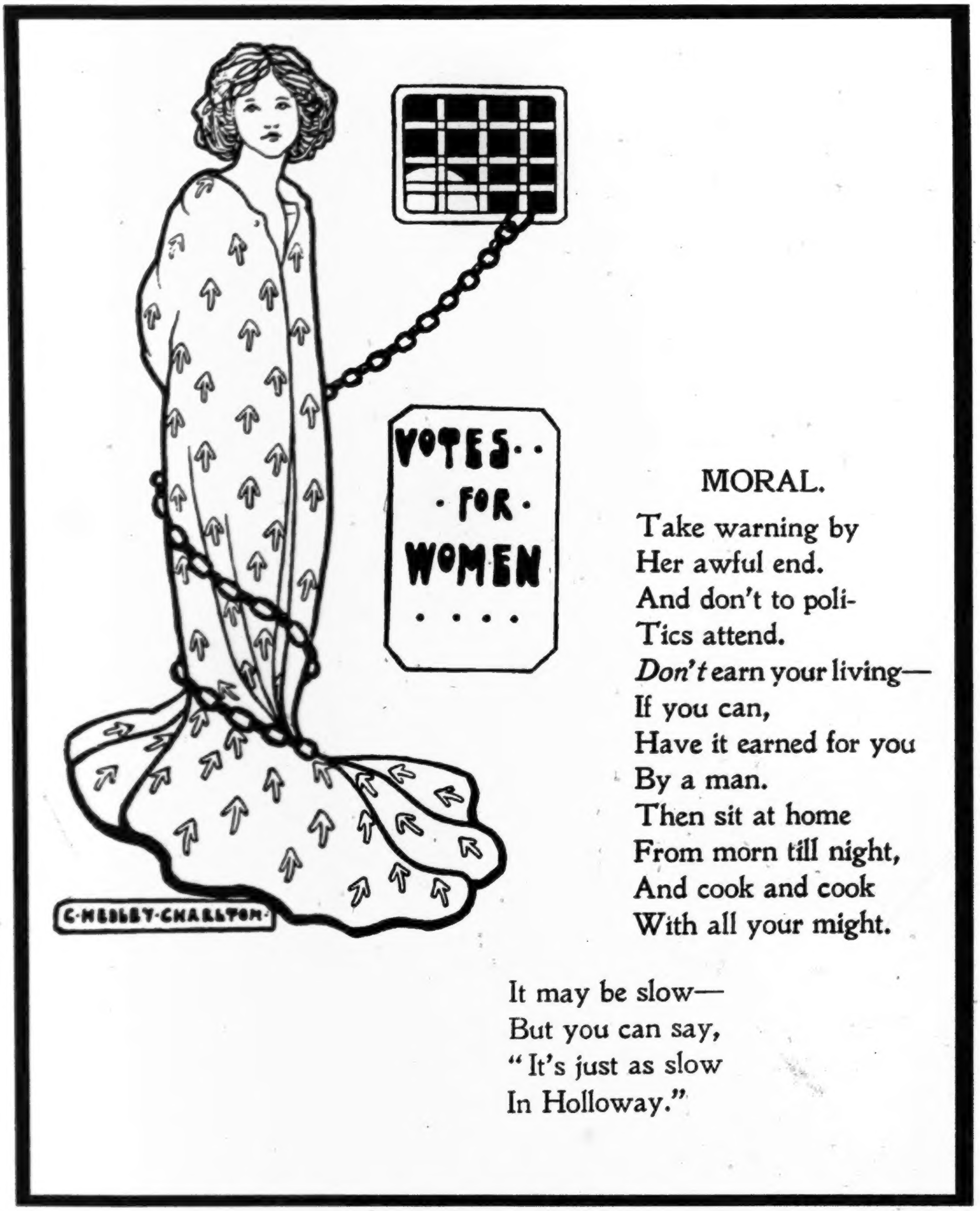


Figure 5: Helen McNicoll, The Chintz Sofa, c. 1913, oil on canvas.



MORAL.

Take warning by
Her awful end.
And don't to poli-
Tics attend.
Don't earn your living—
If you can,
Have it earned for you
By a man.
Then sit at home
From morn till night,
And cook and cook
With all your might.

It may be slow—
But you can say,
"It's just as slow
In Holloway."

Figure 6: C. Hedley Charlton, Illustration to Beware! A Warning to Suffragettes, by Cicely Hamilton, c. 1910.

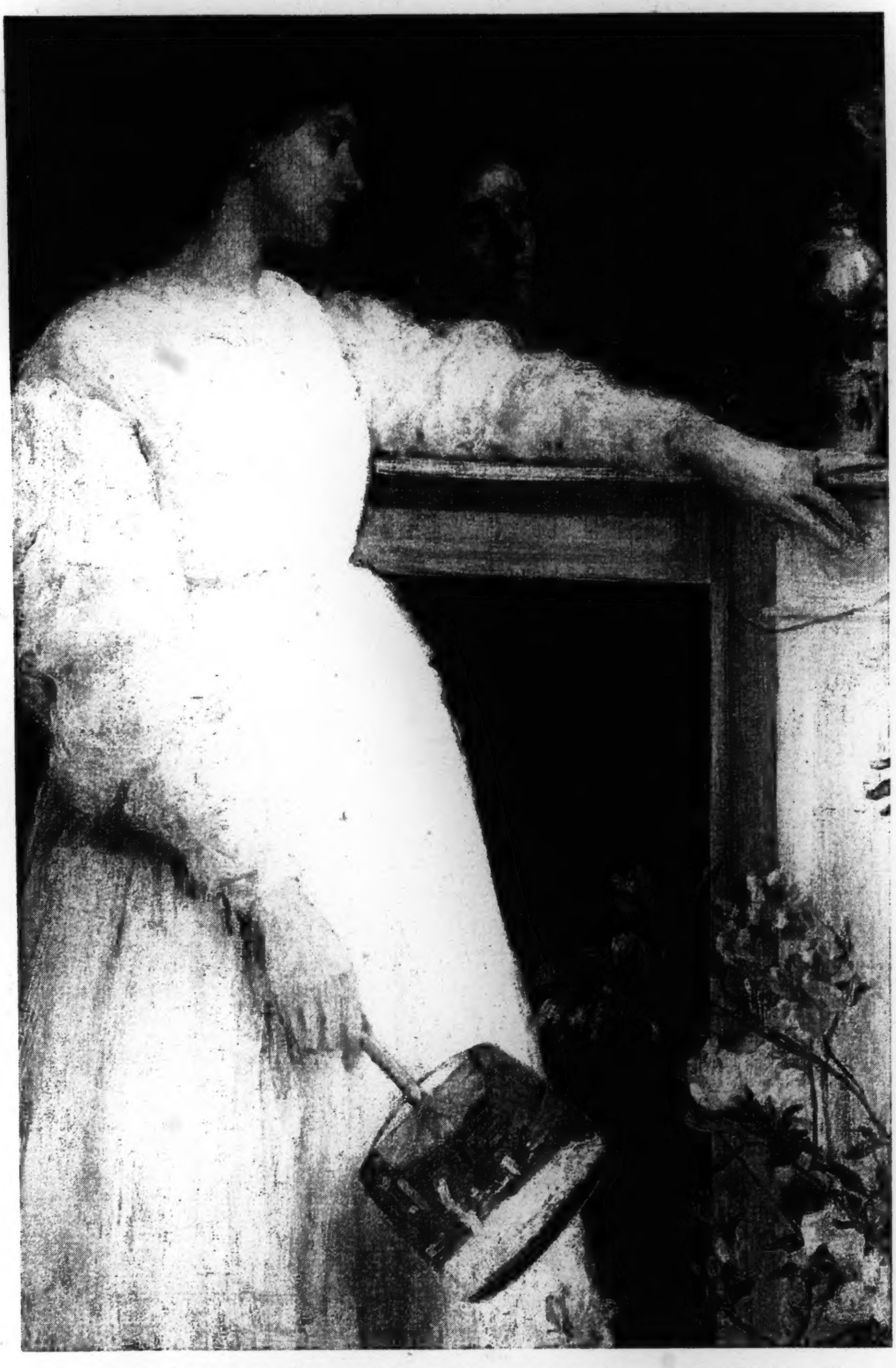


Figure 7: James Abbott McNeil Whistler, Symphony in White No. II: The Little White Girl, 1864, oil on canvas.

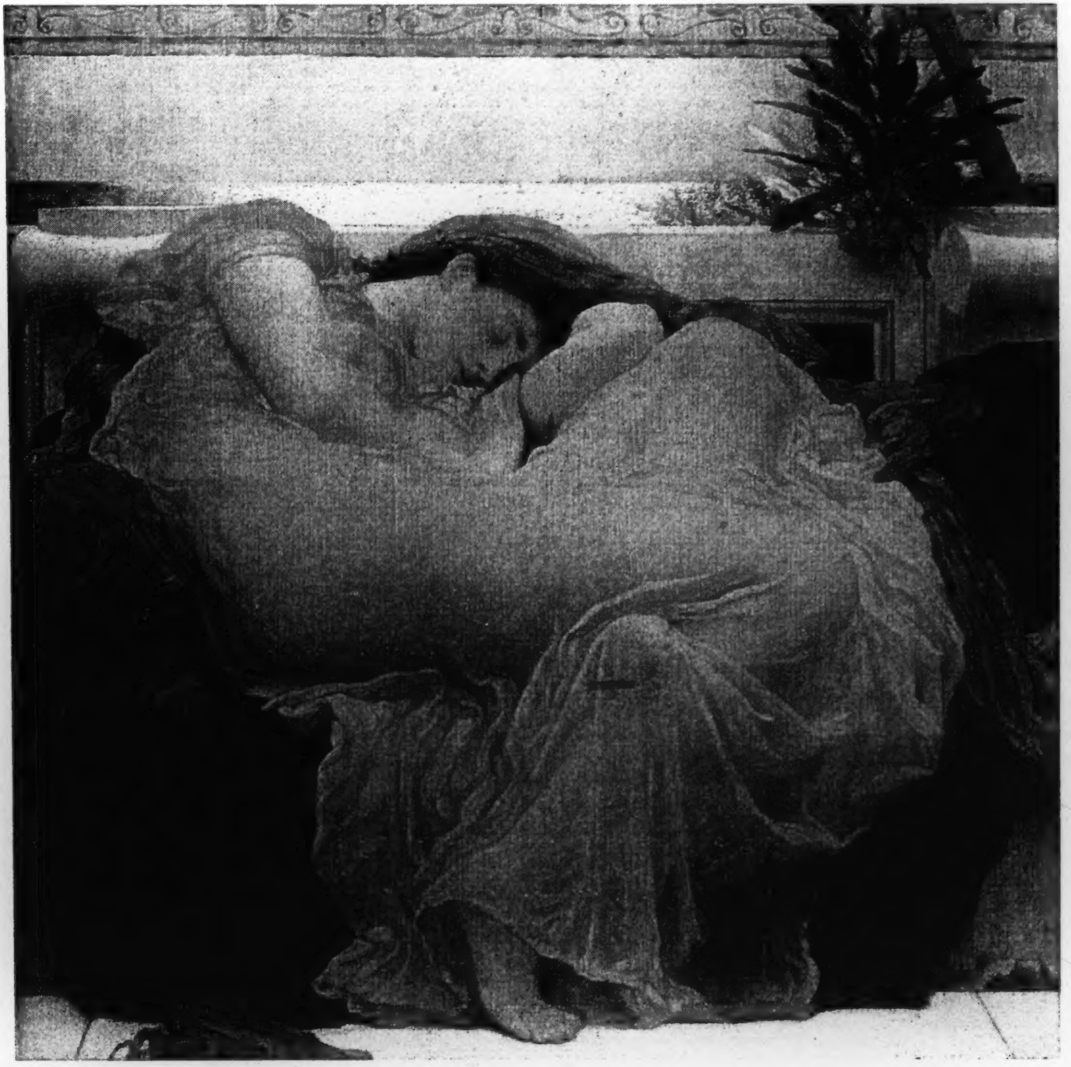


Figure 8: Frederic Leighton, Flaming June, 1895, oil on canvas.

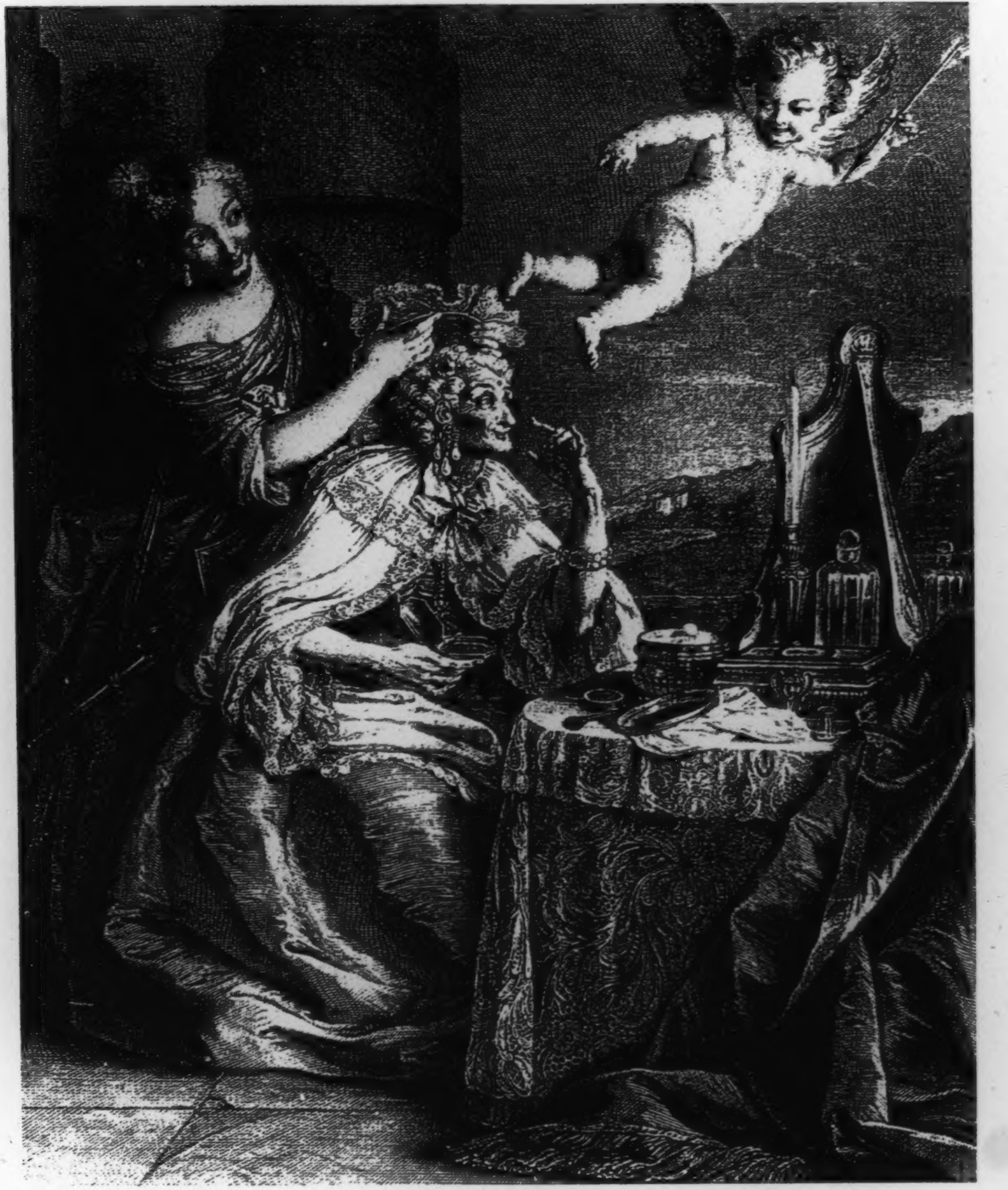


Figure 9: Anonymous, 1745, engraving.

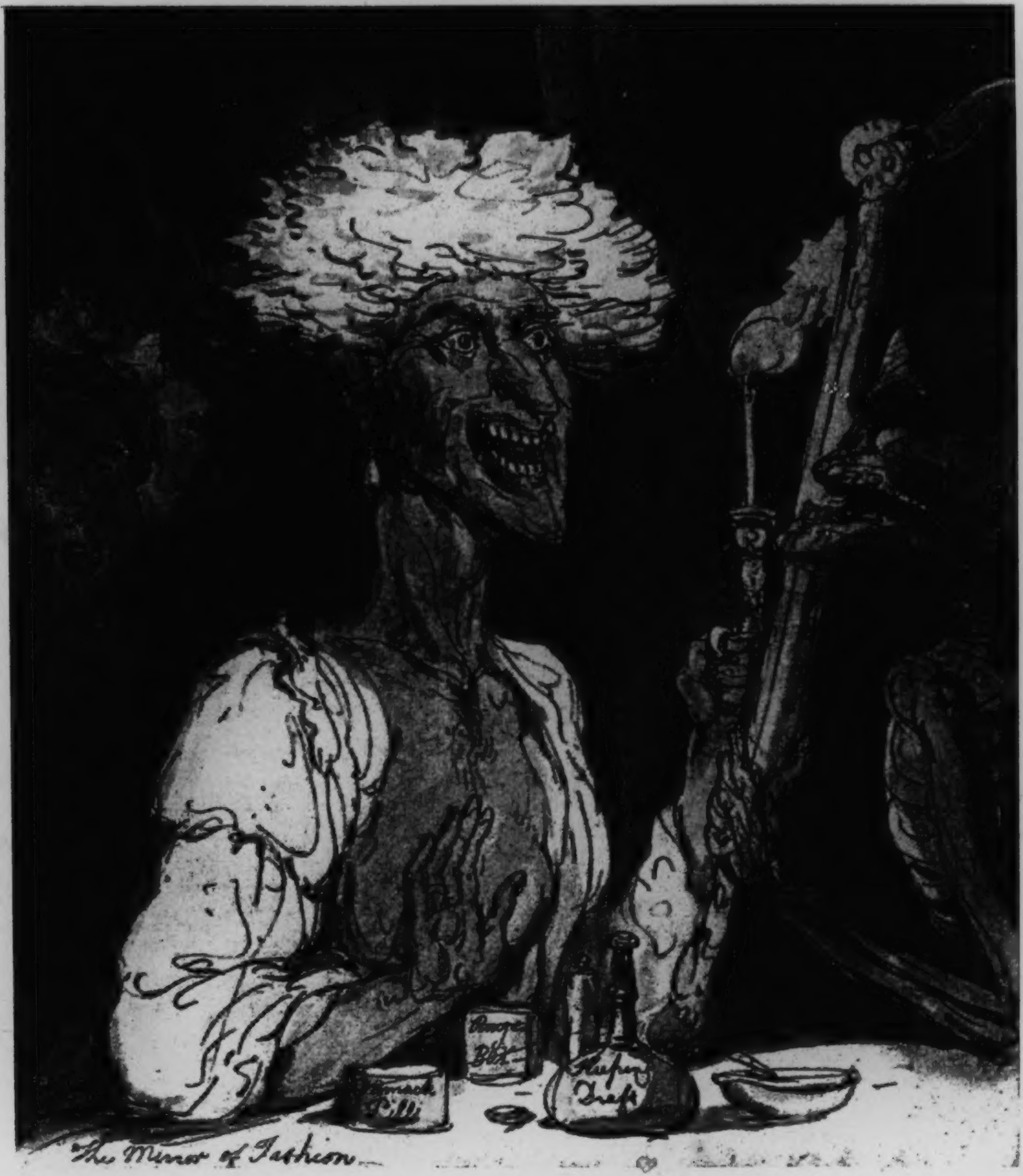

The Mirror of Fashion

Figure 10: T. Rowlandson, The Mirror of Fashion, N.D.

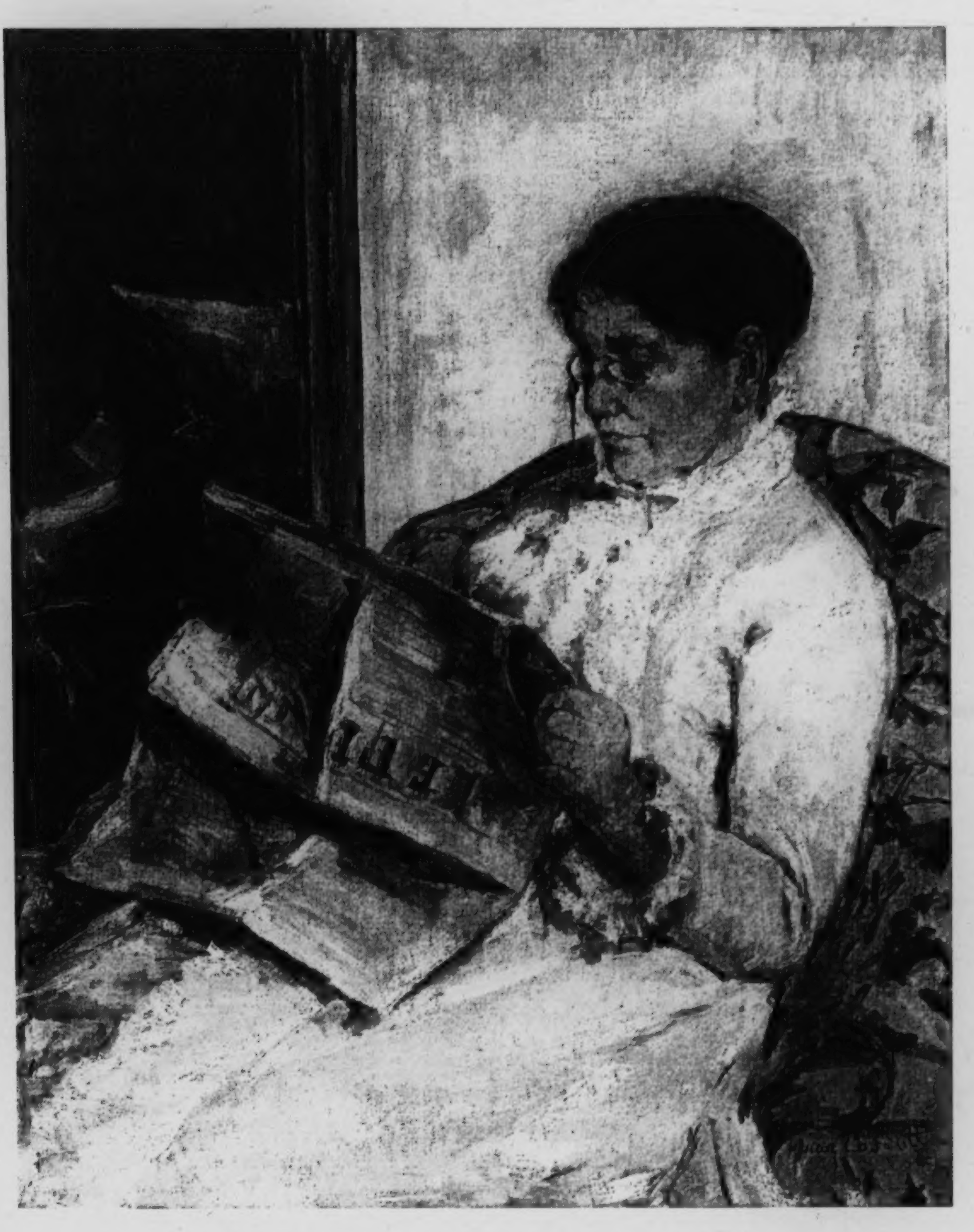
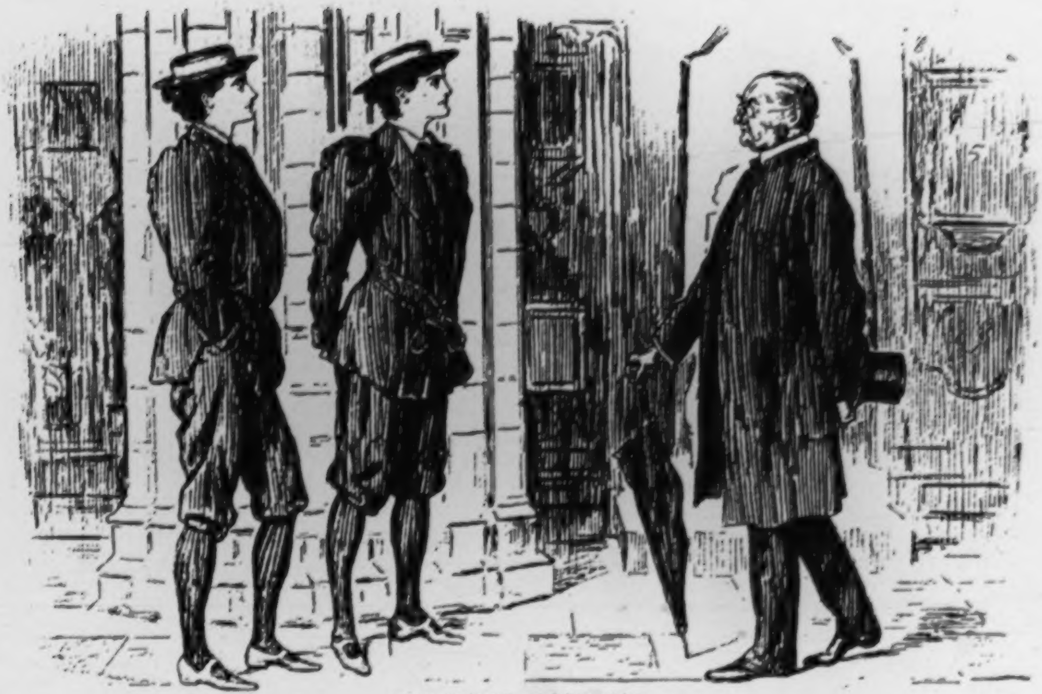
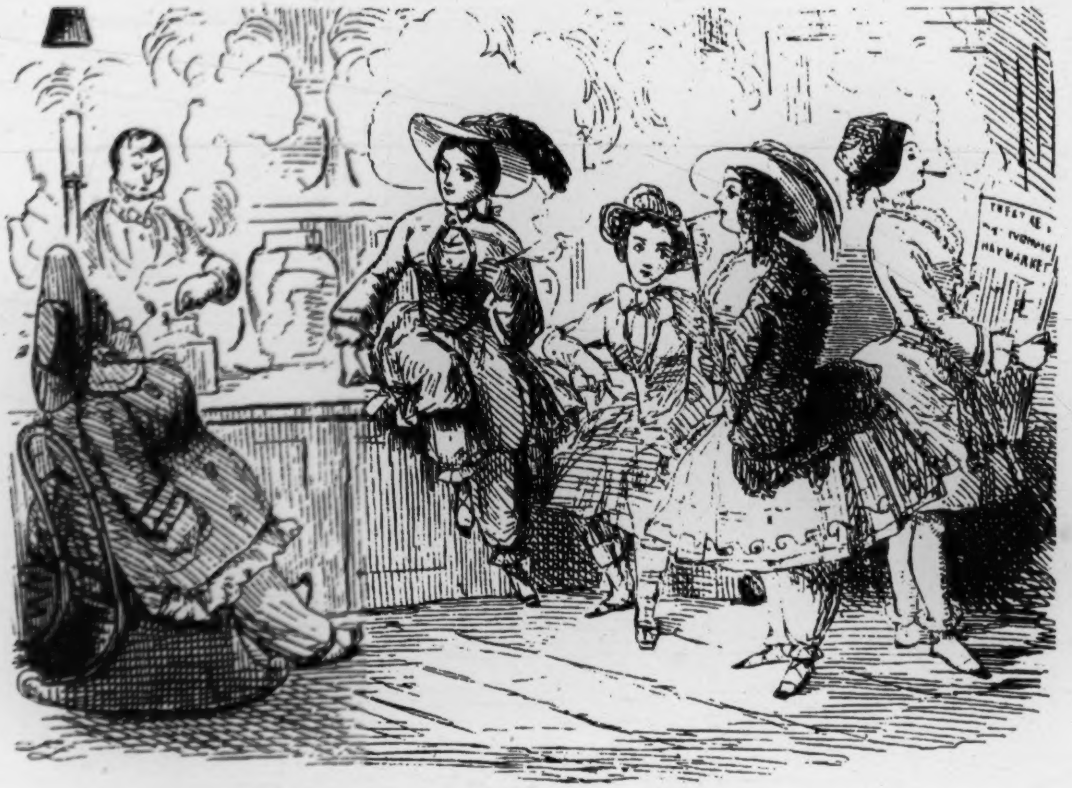


Figure 11: Mary Cassatt, Reading "Le Figaro", 1877-78, oil on canvas.



RATIONAL COSTUME.

Figure 12: Unknown, Rational Costume, *Punch*, 1896.


THEATRE
HAYMARKET

A QUIET SMOKE.

Figure 13: Unknown, A Quiet Smoke, British, c. 1860.

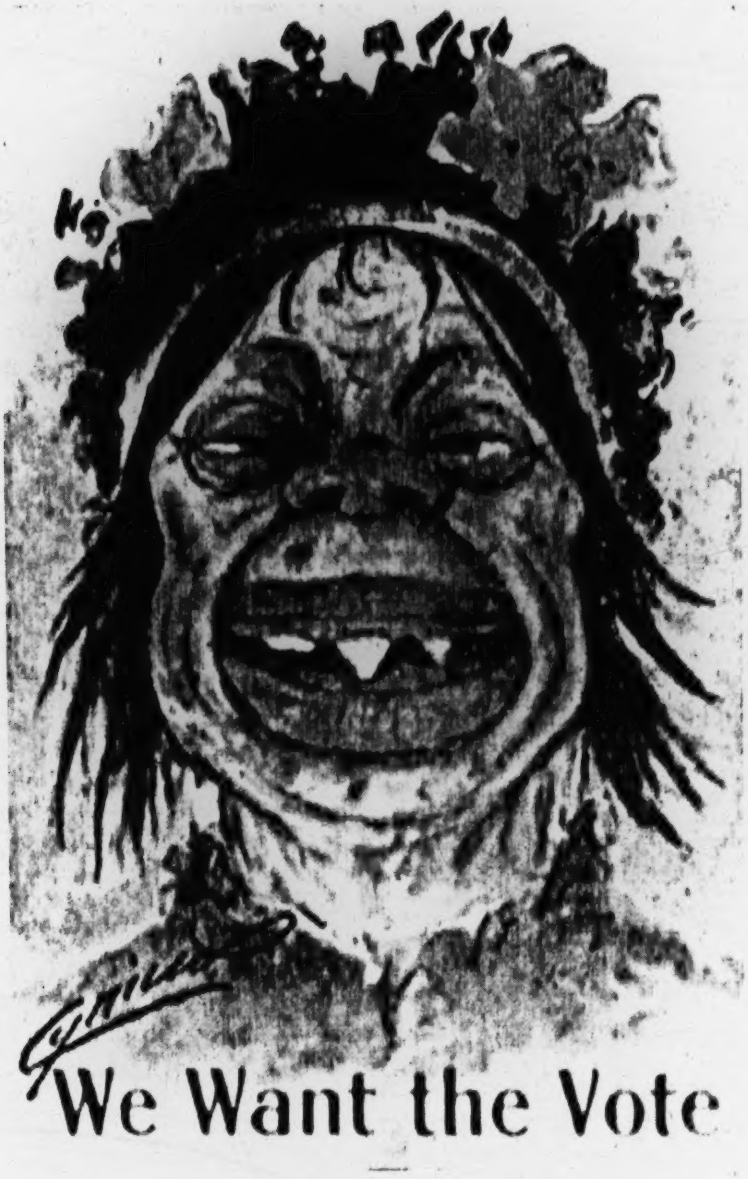

We Want the Vote

Figure 14: Anonymous, We Want The Vote, Postcard, c. 1912.

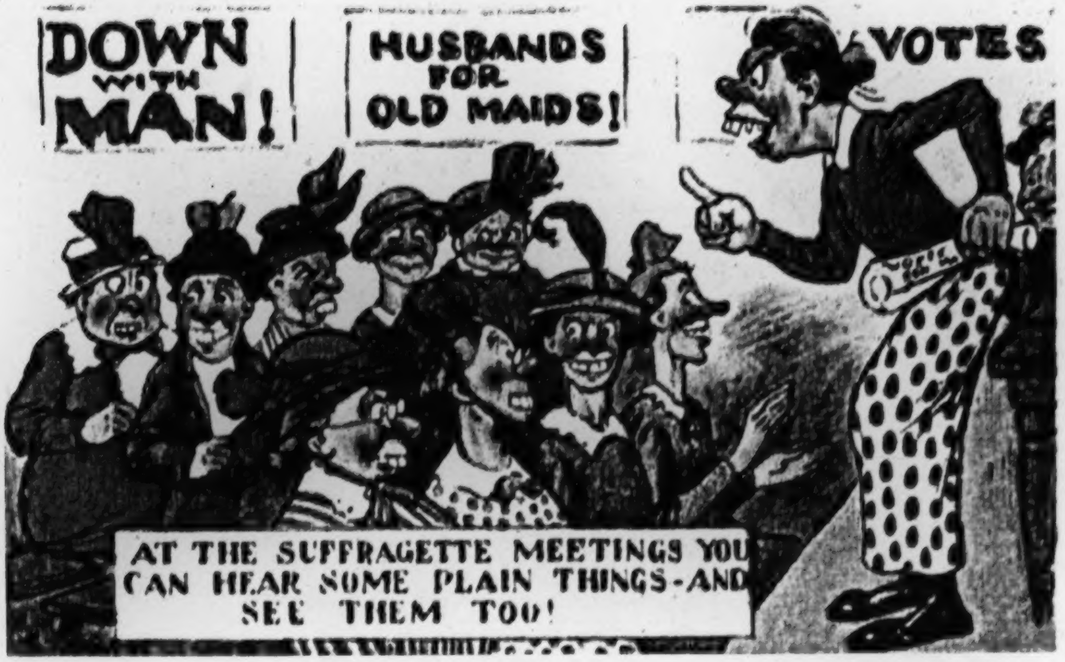

DOWN WITH MAN!
HUSBANDS FOR OLD MAIDS!
VOTES
AT THE SUFFRAGETTE MEETINGS YOU CAN HEAR SOME PLAIN THINGS-AND SEE THEM TOO!

Figure 15: Anonymous, Hear Some Plain Things, Postcard, c. 1912.

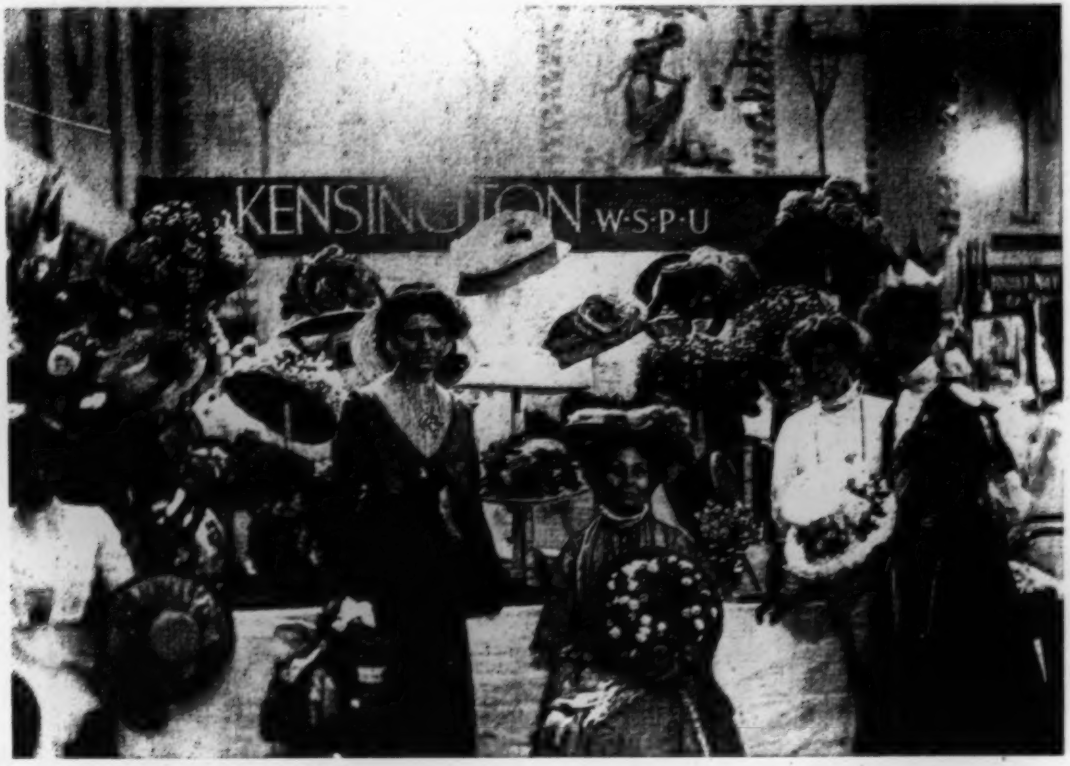

KENSINGTON W·S·P·U

Figure 16: Members of the Women's Social and Political Union, Hat Stall at the Women's Exhibition at the Princes Skating Rink, London, May 1909.

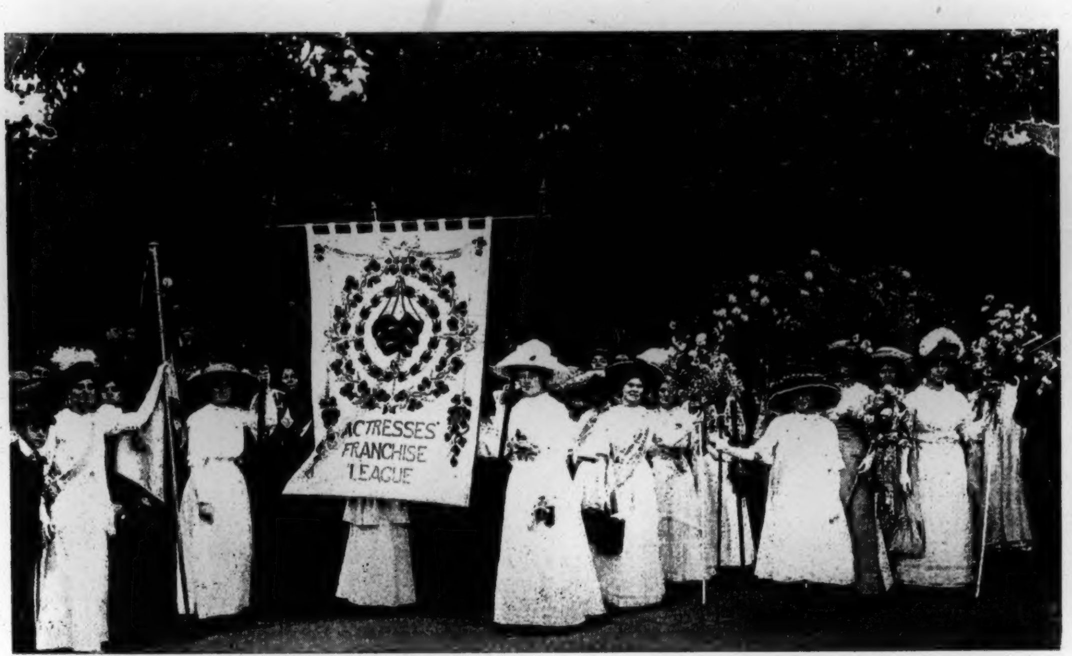

ACTRESSES'
FRANCHISE
LEAGUE

Figure 17: The Actresses' Franchise League, assembled for the Women's Coronation Procession, 17 June 1911.

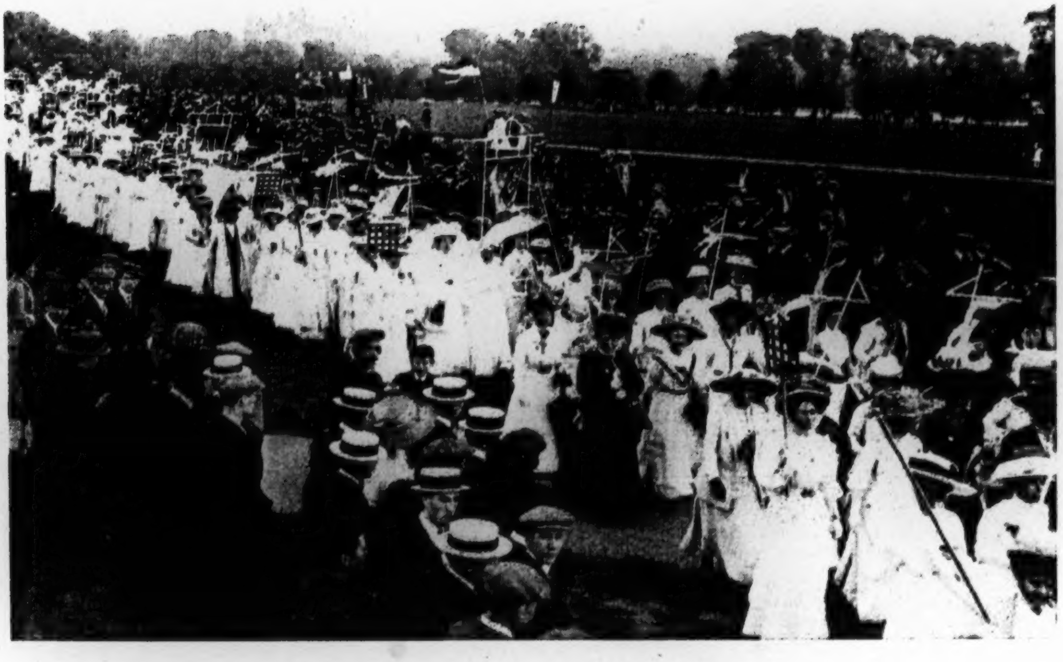
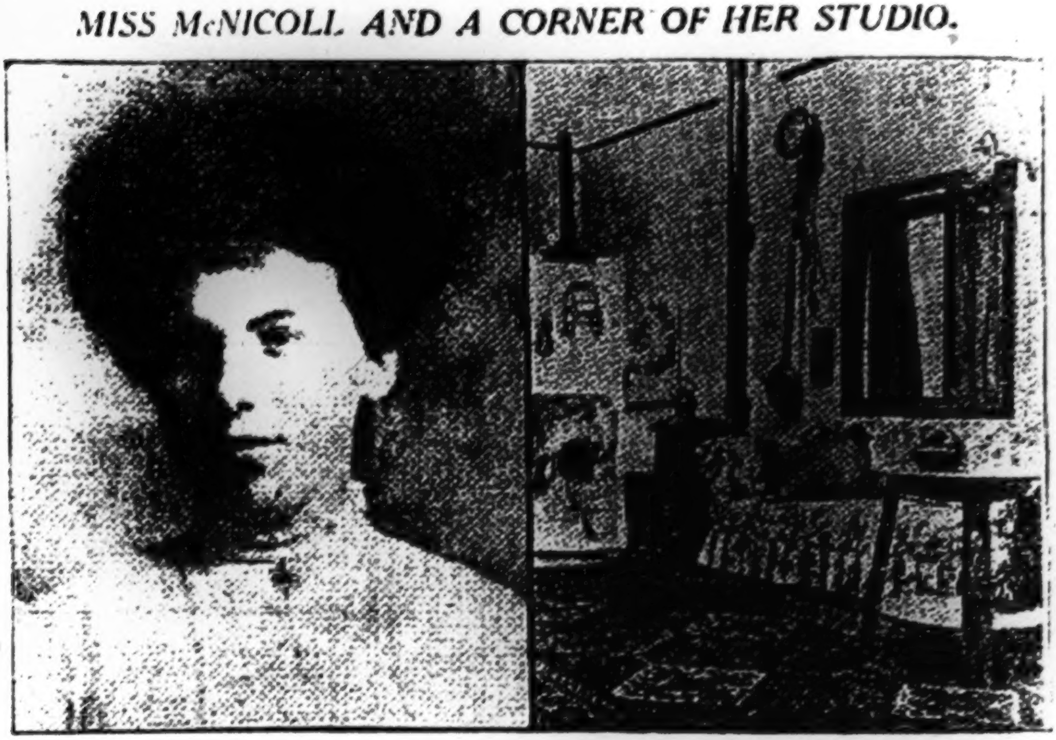


Figure 18: Processionists with emblems of prison gates, 23 July 1910.



MISS McNICOLL AND A CORNER OF HER STUDIO.

Figure 19: Helen McNicoll and her London studio, *Montreal Daily Star*,1913.

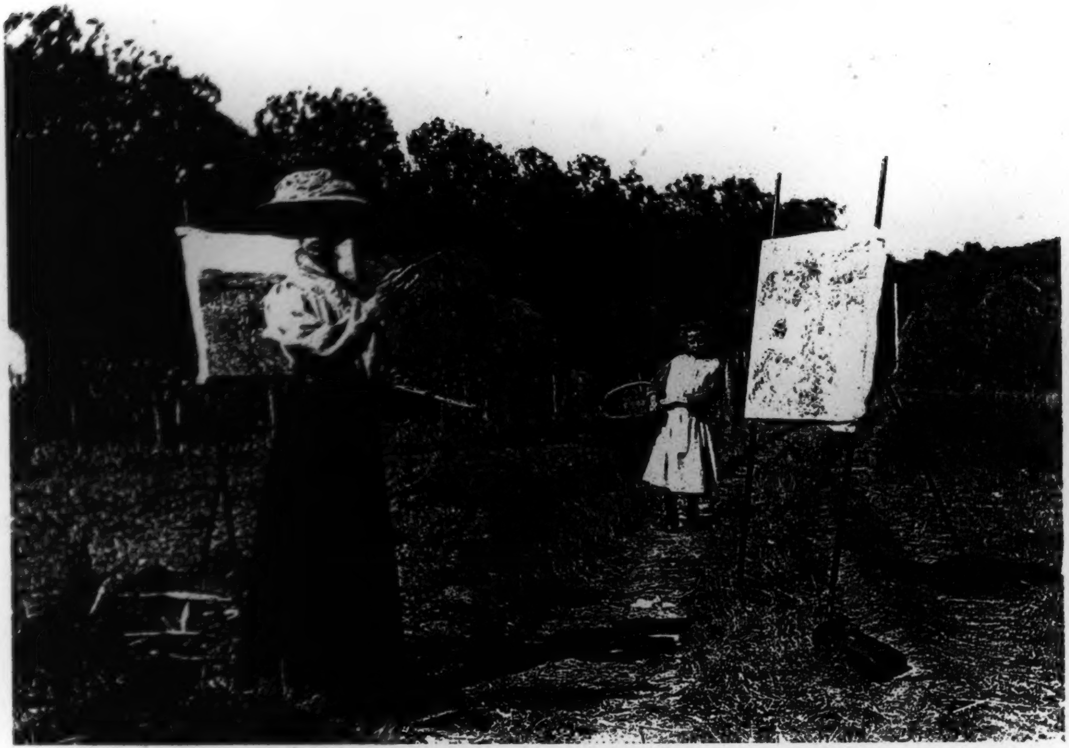


Figure 20: Photograph of Dorothea Sharp and model taken by Helen McNicoll, c.1908.

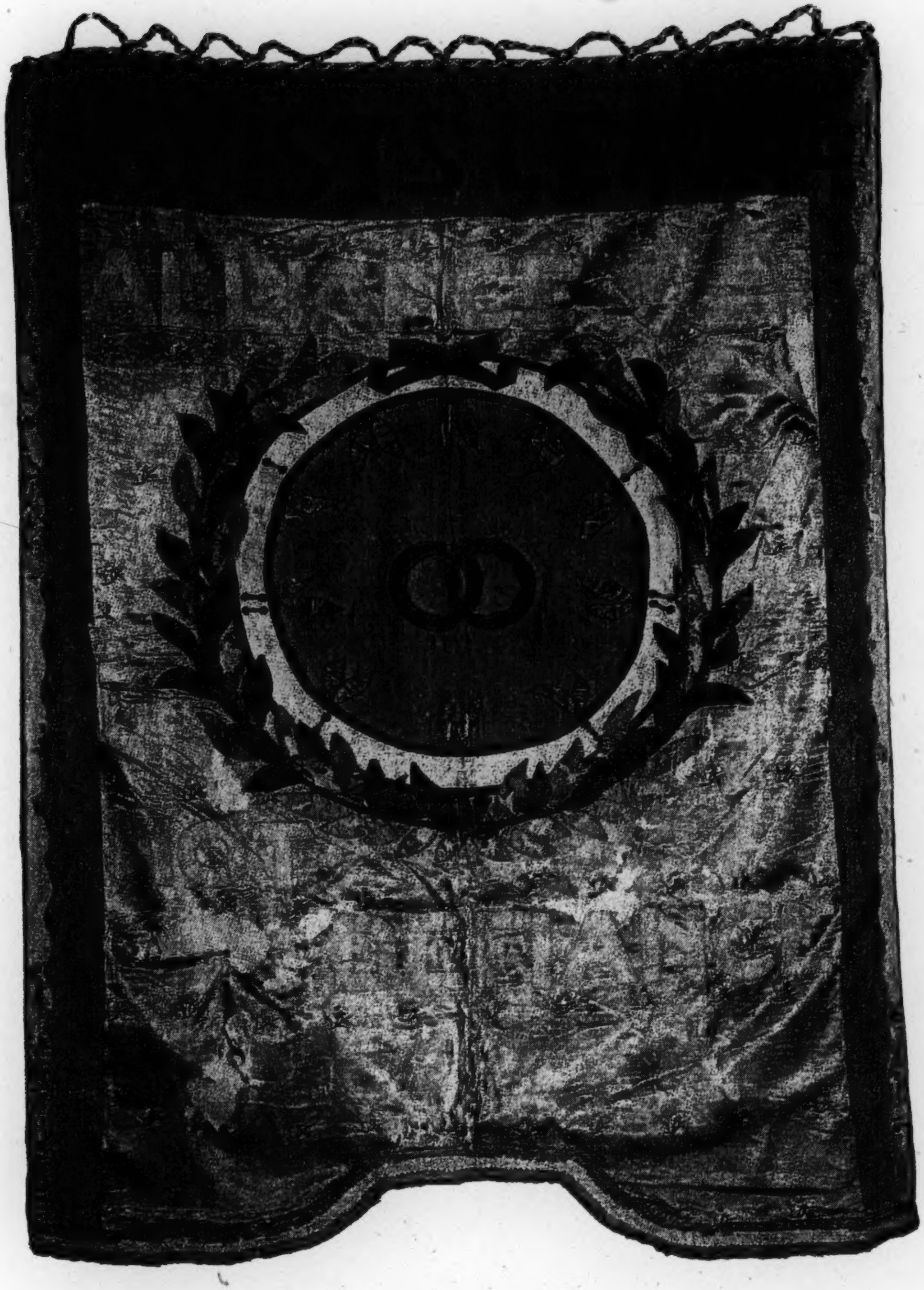


Figure 21: The Artists' Suffrage League banner designed by Mary Lowndes, c.1908.

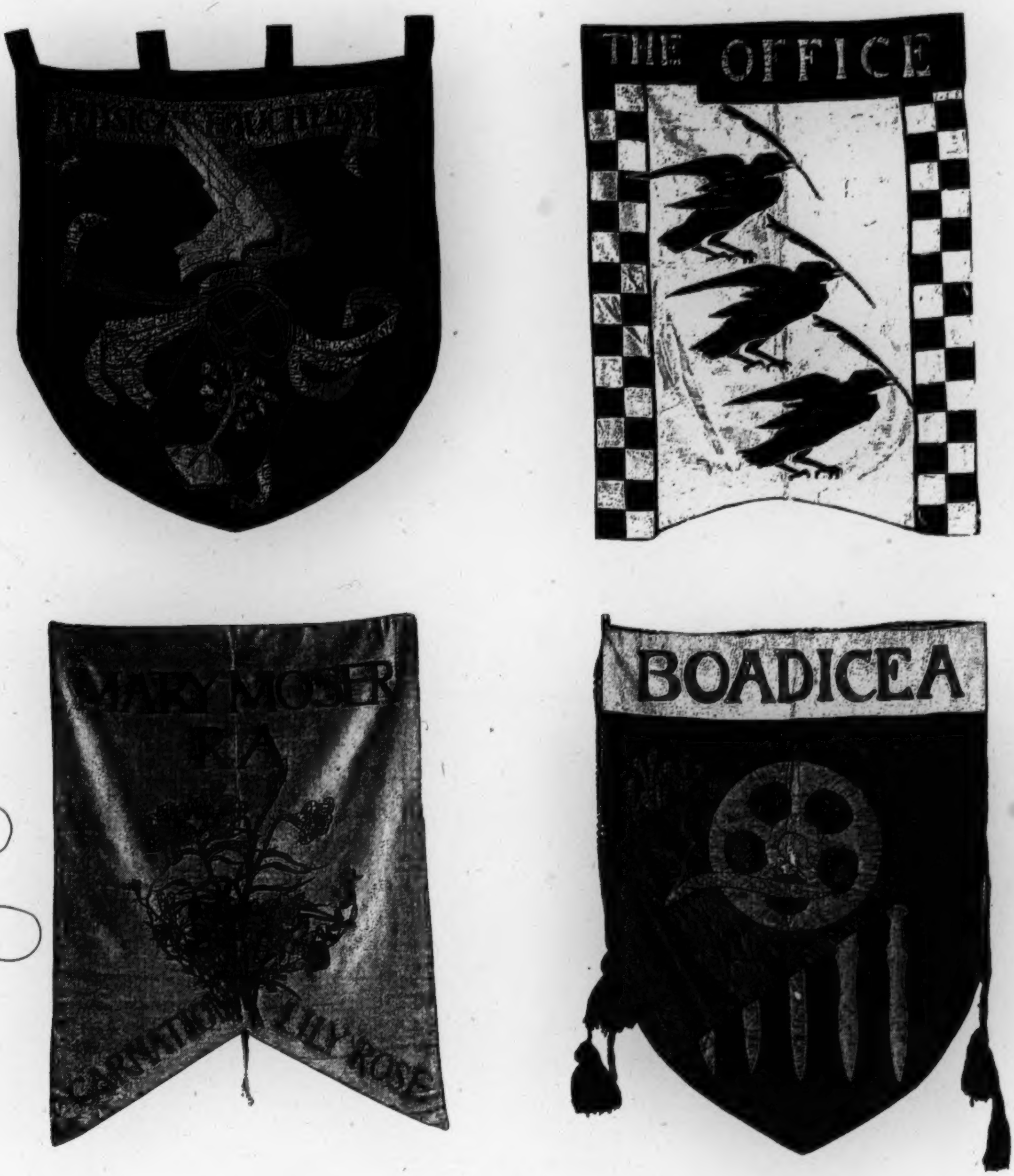

THE OFFICE
MARY MOSER
R.A
CARNATION
LILY ROSE
BOADICEA

Figure 22: Banners executed by the Artists' Suffrage League for the NUWSS procession of 1908. Designed by Mary Lowndes.

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Appendix 1

The letters appearing in this appendix are from the collection of The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Artists' Files and have been transcribed by Lynne Lacombe Robinson.

91 Ashworth - - -
Maida Vale
W.

March 19th, 1913

Dearest Father,

It's pouring so hard that I cannot leave for the studio just yet. I thought I had better give you Dolly's address for you would never guess where I am now. I've left the Days and come to Mrs. Williamson's Lodge, West End London, where Dolly, Miss Sharp and I stopped a little over three years ago. I had been with the Days for such a long time, so I thought that I had best leave, I never felt quite independent there. Mrs. Day was very sweet about it and hoped that I was not leaving upon their account. I said oh no, taken on the whole there were other considerations, it was nearer the buses, etc. I owed her a cheque for 3 months stay with her, and just before I made it out she came up to my room and said that I was not to make it out for more than 30/ a week. I had never been in for lunch or tea, and she was not sure that she was not charging me too much at that price. Anyway I thanked her and sent off the cheque last night. She is certainly not out of pocket - - - for my food did not cost anything like that amount. I am going there to do a little machining!! If you haven't read the enclosed, you had better do so now. I was so surprised when Dolly came up to Mrs. Williamson last night about 9 o'clock to let me see the results of the election. She said it was most exciting, the people seemed to either like or dislike my things - - - decidedly. Dolly worked very hard, she went around amongst the members and brought them up to my pictures, if they did not like them she went after others. There were so many candidates and she was fond to see that my things were not overlooked. Some of them wanted to know my age and D. told them that it wasn't polite to ask a lady's age, but if they must know I was 32 - - - . One man said "That's a mere baby in art." There were 8 vacancies and I came 6th. Three were elected by the standing committee. The first was very good - but rather old fashioned,

the 2nd good sketches,

3rd a former member who had resigned,

4th, Sculptor,

5th very small oil – rather good,

6th myself,

7th & 8th were watercolorists of reputation. I and the one before were the only unknown ones. It was the older members who didn't like my things, one old man said to Dolly, "If that picture is right then the National Gallery is all wrong." One nice man said to D., "It will be a bitter pill for some now that your friend is elected." I must send some of my older ones there I guess. We had a show here on Sunday, I mean at the studio. Dolly sent a lot of invitations. A good many couldn't come but there were quite enough - 57 people came. It's time to post this.

A thousand kisses,

Helen.

C/o Mrs. Williamson
Quex Lodge
West End Lane
N.W

March 28th, 1913

Dear Father,

I have been so busy all the other evenings that having nothing particular to do this evening, I thought I could write you. It gave me quite a shock to think that it was about 10 days since I last wrote you. You will have got my letter saying that I had been elected an R.B.A. Between ourselves though, this year has not been a good year as far as painting goes, and there has been some luck in my election. I should like to know how the figures stand, but I doubt if they have been kept. Last Saturday was a most stormy meeting, but only from one member, a Miss Wright. She and Dolly and I were the only women there. But this one protested the way she had been hung, they, the hangers, were "ratters" and the hanging was a disgrace. You never saw so many angry and helpless looking men - - - - one who tried hard to keep her out of the society, moved that if she did not apologize she should resign. And she did resign, then and there. It was too bad because although her work was rather extreme it was interesting and helped to brighten the show. I am not at all sure that I will bring home my paintings, the best things are at the R.B.A and I don't like to show the things that have not come off very well. Tomorrow is Private View, they are not held in the evening like ours, but I expect there will be a lot of people there. From getting to know the people, the members as a whole are all very nice. We went to a similar show yesterday and again this afternoon to see the pictures that are going to the Academy. They are usually big ones, but they will look about half the size at the R.A. I gave up my - - - for April 4th a little time ago – and today heard from Mrs. Brown that room 110 on the - - - had been reserved for me. It is on the right hand side leading to the library, the first room from the hall. While the weather is so bad I am busy getting some spring clothes, for I don't want to be in a rush - - - when I get back to Mrs. Williamson's for the night. I left - - - Dollie looking at the shops the next day, and I also did some shopping on my own - - - I spoke of it raining but Dolly - - - me. I must go to the post now - - - .

Yours,
Helen.

C/o Mrs. Fowsey
Brunswick Bay
Yorks

July 20th, 1913

Dearest Father,

I got your letter of the 9th yesterday and of the 2nd a few days ago. I've got three cheques to sign and enclose - - - I'm getting richer and I'm afraid that you are the poorer by it. Until the second cheque from Sher. & W. came in I had quite forgotten that I had bought another lot of paint. I hope that you have got my letters by now, they must be some what tame compared to mothers. I just had a letter from her this morning, enclosing one of Alex's. I like to receive them that way for then I know what is going on. Mother didn't say much of what she was doing except that they were leaving Blackpool today for Derby. I think Mrs. Fowler is with her and Charlie has just joined them. But after they get to Derby, Charlie is going back again to - - - to join the Holden's - - - . The weather has been most provoking, no sun, no rain except this afternoon for quite a long time. I have been trying to do the lilies in the little bit of garden in front of us - - - . I've taken some photos and intended to enclose one but cannot find it this moment. We have got into such a nice place, it looks like a tiny little house, our bedroom is on the top floor and our sitting room is just underneath. It was a treat after the way things were managed at the first house we were at. The rooms by themselves are cheap too, only 25 shillings a week. Being at the bakers of course we get delicious bread and cake. A lot of artists have stopped here at one time or another and Miss Fowsey said that they were talking of Mr. Brymner just before we came. When Dolly told some old woman that we were going to the Fowsey's, she said – Oh ye will be very comfortable there, ye will have two young lassies to wait upon ye. One young lassie (Miss Fowsey) who waits upon us is over fifty and wears large green glasses. But they are all pretty much the same, in that they like to stop and gossip. And we have to pass through the kitchen to the - - - unless we squeeze ourselves through the small window into the garden and then out by way of the gate. We often do that when the Fowseys are having their meals. How they manage to live in such a tiny kitchen and house I cannot imagine. And how they make any profit making lemon cheese cake for ½ - - - is another thing I wonder at. One man has a motor car at the top of the hill – but it looks a very flimsy affair and we hear it is always breaking down. But I doubt if ours could get up to the top of Brunswick - - - I've never seen one down here. And to think that we used to walk up to paint at Henderwele 9 years ago. For this is where I came to join Dolly just after they left St Ives - - - . We have had a - - - for models, in fact we went to the next village 2 1/2 miles away to try to get one but so far without success - - - . A Mr. Jackson, a friend of Mr. Brymner's, says that some artists get their models all the way from London - - - . Oh, but Dolly is waiting for the one valuable fountain pen – the ink won't flow out of mine - - - . A thousand kisses and I'll write you again next week.

Helen.

18 Rue de la Ferté
St Valery-sur-somme
France

August 4th, 1914

Dearest Father,

I expect you will have been wondering where we are during the present state of the country. I think that I wrote you that Dolly and I left Longpré about 12 days ago, intending to stop here for 3 weeks and then return to Longpré. Since then, we have not had an English newspaper since Friday and only reports here, some apparently of the wildest nature. We did not realize how serious it was until all the men had orders to mobilize. By the day after tomorrow all men between 21 and 45 must be on their way to the frontier and all people who had carts, horses, or automobiles must place them at the disposal of the army. Today is Tuesday. Sunday the town crier came round saying that all strangers must present themselves at the Hôtel de Ville by 6 o'clock that evening. We went about 4 o'clock. What was our surprise to be told that we could leave for England, the trains would be running until midnight, but after that time we must stop where we were until after the mobilization was over, which would take from 6 to 8 days. Our first impulse was to get back to Longpré to get our luggage, but an English artist here a Mr. Max Bohn advised us to stop here, as the soldiers would be all along the main line at Longpré – also we might be the only English there. We could not move from St Valery without a permit – from the head of the police, we could either go to Longpré or Boulogne but we must stop there. We were afraid that the boats might not be running from Boulogne and we did not want to be stranded there. No newspapers or mail and reports were that the Germans had broken through Belgium and were round Calais and Boulogne. So we have taken out permits to stop here. Yesterday, Dolly heard from her mother, saying to come over at once if she could – war seemed imminent. I have written to Sir L. Brown asking his advice, if the boats were still running. There may be some delay in his getting the letter. I gave a letter to a Frenchman who was trying to get to England today, he was motoring to Boulogne. Today for the first time we have heard that there are some boats sailing. There are a lot of English soldiers at Boulogne. St Valery is quite a little town, but off the mainline. There seems to be plenty of farms and live stock around and the people are forbidden to sell their produce outside the city limits. The town crier came round today saying that all foreigners in any difficulty over money may present themselves at the Hôtel de Ville and they will be supplied – by orders of the British government. People were to close their shops or raise their prices. The French government is evidently taking precautions. We were rather wondering what we should do at first – for we couldn't get anyone to change our English notes. But there is a sailing vessel from Ireland which has just brought in a lot of coal and the captain gave us French money and English - - - for a 5 pound note. I won't growl at Dolly another time for bringing so much money. Between us we have 25 pounds – quite a nice sum when our expenses are about 1 pound a week each. And the food is ever so much better at Longpré. The people are all so nice here, and everyone is agreed that this would be one of the safest possible places to come to. Our landlady is so nice and will trust us with anything we want. It would be quite exciting if it were not so sad having all the men go. All the English here, about a dozen, agree that they would rather be here than anywhere. They think that London and the east coast will be one of the worst places of all. When the mobilization is over, we are going to try and get someone to go and fetch our luggage from Longpré. That is the chief bother although there are shops here for all necessities. The government is responsible for us, so that is why we cannot go ourselves – even Frenchman have to get a special permit to leave the town. There is great excitement here now for they have got hold of a small German trading vessel, and they are bringing it into port. They won't allow the sailors to land but they must feed them. We are wondering if they will get many - - - .

We haven't been able to do any work since Friday, it has been too exciting. Groups of people standing about waiting for the news. Newspapers are posted up against the shop windows for people to read. Dollie and I don't want to leave unless we really have to for we think we should be better off here. They say that the estuary here is so wide that people could not possibly get over it.

Tuesday – It is time I send off this letter, but here we are in London again at Follies house address: 8 Clifton Gardens. But we are mad – we came over Sunday at noon and got to London about 7:00. Of course it was Mr. L. Brown's doing. He had received my letters asking his advice as to coming back. Geraldine was in London and went down to the C.P.R offices. When he heard where we were he called out to someone "Oh – the daughter of our Vice-President is shut up in France." He immediately sent over his private secretary Mr. Mercer to fetch us. It was only by the merest chance he got an auto at Boulogne and motored to St Valery. He got special permission from the French ambassador at London to come over and of course he had his passport. The vice consul at Boulogne wired us to get permission to leave. The English woman there took our photos which were stuck upon a piece of paper and stamped by the chief of police. We managed to get all our small hand luggage in the car and it was a most exciting drive. Soldiers at every railway crossing, bridge or little town. I think that we had to present our passports about 20 times on the way. The soldiers would stand in the road and hold up their bayonets for us to stop and once another motor-car waved to us to stop and present passports. All the country seemed deserted, only old men and youths working in the fields, all have gone to the front, one can see that even the men guarding the roads are not the best. They were all very polite to us. Of course Mr. Mercer took us to the best hotel at Boulogne, he has engaged rooms before he left and we had a cabin on board. I prefer the second class public cabin, it is so much more airy. Miss Sharp was delighted to see us for she had made herself quite ill worrying. She hadn't received any letters or telegrams that we had sent. I've been busying myself shopping for some clothes, since I'm practically without anything and I expect to see Mr. L. Brown and thank him for bringing us over. We have decided about where we are going, practically the whole summer gone and nothing done. It was - - - at Longpré you know. Mr. Mercer thinks that Longpré being on the main line, the C.P.R may be able to get my beautiful trunk (the one you gave me) later on. Mr. Brown has already sent me a pass for - - -. It is on the south coast of Wales and there are a lot of places near that may do for us. Dolly is trying to persuade her mother to come, also her sister and her children. I'm so mad because business has cropped up and Dolly says she must go to Enfield - - - to see someone there. But it was because Miss Sharp was not well that Dolly said she couldn't leave before the day after tomorrow for Wales. She had hoped that we would stop in London altogether now! Everything seems normal, prices have gone down. Wood Green is the station before

Enfield so I'm going with Dollie and stop at Aunt Pollies on the chance of finding them in. Heaps of love, and do take care of yourself.

Helen.

8B – Twelthorpe Studios
Warwick Ave
Padd

October 20th, 1914

Dearest Father,

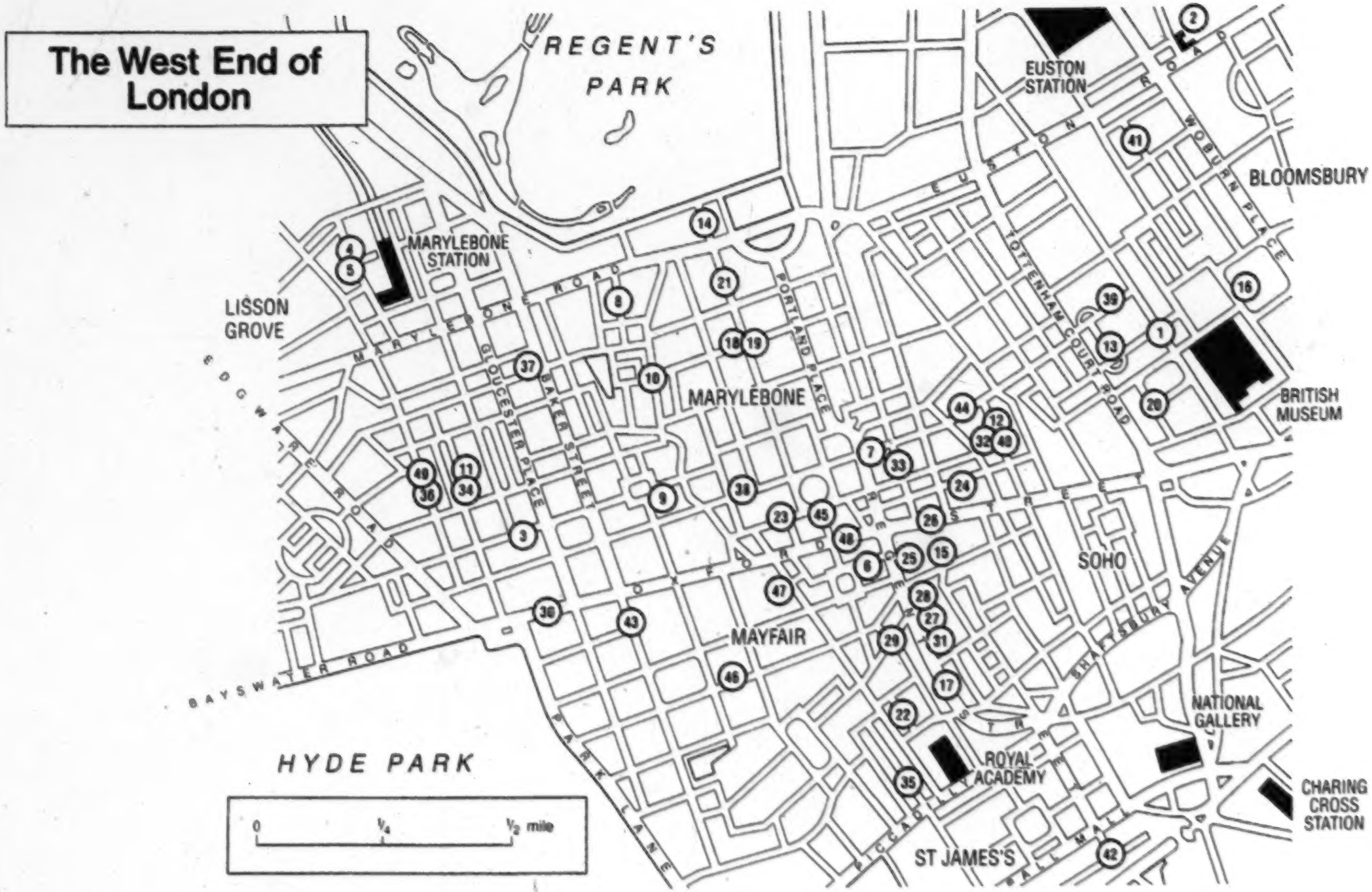
Just a few lines to go by this post to tell you that things seem to be coming my way again. And I feel ever so much better and look it too, even Dolly says so. We have not finished our shopping yet, for we are still expecting our luggage. I had a letter from Mr. L. Brown saying that the agent in Paris had written to Longpré but had received no reply yet. I think Madame must have fled. It will be a boon if we can get it again. That nice hand bag that you gave me is in it. There are not so many buses now and recruits are training everywhere. But as far as I can see there is not such a great difference except in the lights of London. But we have only been out once or twice in the evening. The R.B.A. private view was opened last Saturday – quite a crowd. They have hung my picture pretty well. Dolly's picture (the one she is going to give you) attracted a lot of attention. She put on a big price so no one would buy it and heard someone say "Forty pounds." Dolly says she wants a few lines on the next page. Nellie is a very tiresome girl about telling nice things about her painting. If I hadn't my sharp ears & overheard, I know she would have told me of the different members of the R.B.A. coming up to her on Private view day and saying 'you have the best pictures in the exhibition.'! (D.S.)

Rats!! It's called "The Victorian Dress" but I call it the "mustard one" on acct of its color. I must try to find the - - - address book is in France. Mr. Gibb has been ill.

Love Helen.

Appendix 2

Map of the West End of London at the turn of the twentieth century, showing the locations of women's groups and organized feminist activity in this area.


The West End of London
REGENT'S PARK
EUSTON STATION
BLOOMSBURY
MARYLEBONE STATION
LISSON GROVE
MARYLEBONE
BRITISH MUSEUM
SOHO
MAYFAIR
NATIONAL GALLERY
CHARING CROSS STATION
ROYAL ACADEMY
ST JAMES'S
HYDE PARK
EUSTON ROAD
WOBURN PLACE
TOTTENHAM COURT ROAD
PORTLAND PLACE
MARYLEBONE ROAD
GLOUCESTER PLACE
BAKER STREET
EDGWARE ROAD
OXFORD STREET
BAYSWATER ROAD
PARK LANE
PICCADILLY
PALL MALL
REGENT STREET
SHAFTESBURY AVENUE
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Map and legend from: Lynne Walker, "Vistas of Pleasure: Women Consumers of Urban Space in the West End of London, 1850-1900," Women in the Victorian Art World, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 70-89.

1 c.1884 – 2 Gower Street. Home of Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Agnes Garrett, her designer sister, Agnes Garret, who decorated the house with her cousin Rhoda Garrett and worked from it.
2 1874 – Elizabeth Garrett Anderson's New Hospital for Women, 222 & 224 Marylebone Road.
3 1874 – Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, 4 Upper Berkeley Street. Her mansion flat was decorated by Agnes and Rhoda Garrett.
4 1859 – 18 Blandford Square – Emily Davies's address during her London visit.
5 1859 – 5 Blandford Square – Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's family home; used as a power base in London even after her marriage.
6 1858 – 14a Princes Street; headquarters of the Langham Circle before the move to Langham Place. Contained the *Englishwoman's Journal*, the Ladies' Institute, the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women (SPEW) and from 1858/59, the Ladies' Sanitary Association.
7 from December 1859 – 19 Langham Place, occupants as No. 6, but also included the Association for the Promotion of Social Science before its move to Waterloo Place in 1861.
8 1860 – 14 Nottingham Place. Octavia Hill's residence.
9 1861 – 22 Manchester Square. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson's Home address.
10 1860's – Paradise Place (now Garbutt Place). Octavia Hill's first housing scheme; note proximity to her house in Nottingham Place.
11 c.1860 – St. Mary's Church, Bryanston Square. Meeting place of Henrietta Rowland (later Dame Henrietta Barnett) and the Curate of St. Mary's (later Canon Barnett), founders of Hampstead Garden Suburb.
12 1875 – 22 Berners Street. SPEW.
13 c.1890 – Brabazon House, South Crescent, Tottenham Court Road. Accommodation for single women.
14 1853 – 1 Upper Harley Street. Florence Nightingale lived here when she worked around the corner in Harley Street.
15 1869 – 23 Great Marlborough Street. Ladies' Institute.
16 1891 – Russell Square. Mrs. Pankhurst's home and meeting place for suffrage campaigners.
17 1864 – 185–229 Regent Street. Verrey's Cafe and Restaurant, Harriet Verrey, proprietor.
18 1853 – 66 (now 47) Harley Street. Governess's Benovelent Society (f.1843).
19 1848 – Queen's College, 66 (now 47) Harley Street.
20 1849 – Bedford Square. Ladies College (later Bedford College).
21 1853 – Harley Street. Harley Street Nursing Home, Florence Nightingale, superintendent.
22 1893 – Cork Street. Pioneer Club, restricted to active members of Women's Movement.
23 1859 – 16A Old Cavendish Street. Ladies' Sanitary Association.
24 26 Castle Street, Regent Street. The home (?) address of Sarah Lewin, the Secretary of SPEW.
25 1850–1900. Regent Street. In addition to its role as a shopping mecca for women consumers, it was also the site of a large variety of businesses owned and run by women.
26 1860–1900. Oxford Street. Although Regent Street remained important at the upper end of the market, from the 1860's with the development of the department store, Oxford Street became the central location for shopping in London.
27 e.g. 1870 – St. James's Hall, Regent Street. A popular venue in the West End used, for example by the organizers of Girton College for their first appeal meeting.
28 1876 – Regent Street. Liberty's, the ultimate feminised shopping experience.
29 9 Conduit Street. Architectural Union, a venue favoured by women's groups; for instance, an exhibition of the Society of Female Artists (1866).
30 1889 – 448 Oxford Street. Dorothy Restaurant, run by women for women.
31 1891 – 316 Regent Street. YWCA.
32 1874 – 22 Berners Street. Berners Club (formerly Working Women's Club).
33 c.1872 – Great Portland Street. School of Midwifery.
34 late 1860's – 69 Bryanston Square. St. Mary's Dispensary for Women and Children.
35 1875 – 25 Albermarle Street. Albermarle Club, for men and women.
36 1878 – 132 Seymour Place. Club for Working Women.
37 1886 – 12 York Place, Baker Street. Lincoln House, one of seven homes for working class working women.
38 1885 – Mortimer Street. Welbeck House. Accommodation and meals for working women with meals available to non-residents.
39 1889 – Chenies Street. Residential chambers for 'ladies'.
40 1890 – 22 Berners Street. *Englishwoman's Review.*
41 1862 – Taviton Street. Emily Faithfull's house.
42 1861 – Waterloo Place. Association for the Promotion of Social Science.
43 c. 1890 – North Audley Street. Society for the Sale of Ladies Work.
44 1880's – Mortimer Street. Dorothy Restaurant, sister to Dorothy's in Oxford Street.
45 1891 – Holles Street, Cavendish Square. Ladies Victoria Club.
46 1891 – 12 Grosvenor Street. The Alexandra, club for women.
47 1891 – 31 New Bond Street. The University Club for Ladies.
48 1891 – 231 Oxford Street. Somerville Club.

Based on Godfrey Edition of Old Ordnance Survey map of 1914